

Gardening with Wildlife and No Mow May is on the way

Hedgehogs, bats, sparrows, song thrushes, some butterfly species and stag beetles are all declining species in the UK, but if we manage our gardens to benefit wildlife, as well as ourselves, these creatures and many more will find refuge.

Mrs Not-So-Old Composter and I have tried to manage our garden in a way that benefits us and the natural world. We are so pleased to say that we have two song thrushes who are regular visitors to our garden. Last month they led the dawn chorus even before it was dawn! We also have piles of decaying wood in various parts of the garden and one of the old oak log piles has stag beetle larvae in it (protected from the woodpeckers which have plenty of food in the peanut feeders). Other wood piles act as resting/feeding stations for hedgehogs. Our ponds have frogs, toads, newts, dragonflies, and pond skaters, and they're also providing water for birds – there was a kingfisher here, last year. We also have a pair of mallard ducks regularly visiting one of our ponds, so we have now built a duck house for them. It floats on the pond in the hope they will nest, safe from predators. Towards the end of last year the Cornwall Mammal Group confirmed that we have dormice in the garden – how wonderful is that?

Together, our gardens are a vast living landscape and the way we care for them can make a big difference to the natural world. There are many ways to attract pollinators, by planting a range of native species to flower throughout the year. The simple act of providing water for wildlife will have a huge impact. Try leaving a patch of logs or long grass undisturbed all year, giving shelter to all sorts of wildlife. And go chemical and peat-free, to maintain a healthy ecosystem. And you should have stopped cutting your hedges now until 31 August. While this is a legal requirement for agricultural land, it is considered best practice to avoid trimming garden hedges during this period in order to protect wildlife.

While just about any flower with nectar can be a treat for butterflies, it is a slightly different story for caterpillars who often need specific food or 'host' plants. In fact, most butterfly and caterpillar species have just a short list of host plants. Often this is because caterpillars need particular chemicals from that plant to bring out their warning colouration as butterflies. Growing host plants for caterpillars in the garden is not necessarily guaranteed to attract the relevant butterflies, but butterflies do breed in gardens, so it is worth experimenting with different host plants to see which species might find your garden suitable. Some butterflies and caterpillars overwinter, so shelter in the garden, such as thick growths of ivy, is also important. Stinging nettles are critical host plants for several butterfly species, including the Small Tortoiseshell, Peacock, Red Admiral, Comma, and Painted Lady, which lay eggs on them. Leaving a sunny, uncontrolled patch of nettles acts as a crucial caterpillar food source. For optimal use, we should maintain a patch of nettles and cut them back in early summer to encourage fresh, nutritious growth.

It's not only butterflies that need nettles, several moths rely on them for their larvae too. The small magpie, burnished brass, mother-of-pearl and the curious looking spectacle moths are just some of the 'night flying shift' that will live where these much maligned plants grow. So if you want these and many more species of day and night-time flying pollinators in your garden.....spare those nettles!

Approximately 30 species of bird are regular garden visitors, although more than 140 bird species have been recorded in British gardens. Some are seasonal visitors such as swallows and house martins in summer or redwings in winter. Others such as robins and blackbirds are resident year round and can become very familiar faces in the garden. A good population of birds in the garden is part of a healthy garden ecosystem, helping to

keep caterpillars and aphids in check which can damage garden plants. Watching birds in your garden is a wonderful way to connect with nature. We can help them by planting berrying or fruit bushes and trees, leaving seed heads, feeding all year round, providing water for drinking and bathing, and putting up nesting boxes.

Remember, it is an offence under the Wildlife & Countryside Act to damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird while it is in use or being built. If pruning or working close by, stop work immediately if you suspect birds are active and, I can't say this often enough, don't cut hedges from 1 March until 31 August, at the earliest.

The UK's 17 species of bats are coming under increasing pressure as the wooded areas, ponds and open green spaces they use to feed and roost are shrinking. Once again we can help in numerous ways by:

- * growing plants which will attract insects;
 - * not mowing a patch of lawn to let the grass grow long, this is habitat for insect larvae;
 - * retaining mature trees, those with hollows can make excellent bat roosts;
 - * putting up a bat box (widely available or build your own);
 - * reducing light pollution which disorientates bats by fitting hoods to security lights and only using low intensity garden lights;
 - * avoiding pesticides in the garden, especially insecticides that will reduce the prey of bats
- In summer.

And last but by no means least, hedgehogs; despite being one of Britain's best-loved mammals, hedgehogs are in alarming decline and need our help. Nearly half of the UK population has been lost in just 13 years. Previously a widespread garden visitor, this nocturnal native is now classed as vulnerable to extinction in the UK. We can all help to prevent this by:

- doing less gardening. Yes, really. Leave wild patches, plant hedges and if you have space (and if you dare) leave patches of brambles to grow freely; if you feel that is a step-too-far you can plant something like *Rubus tricolor* (a prostrate evergreen shrub with red-bristly shoots bearing glossy, shallowly lobed leaves, white-hairy beneath, and white flowers in summer (loved by bees), followed by edible red fruit)
- make sure hedgehogs can get in (and out). Hedges are the best perimeters for hedgehogs and all kinds of wildlife. Failing that, leave small openings in fences and boundaries;
- provide food and water, either in the form of specially made hedgehog food or by creating the right habitat for its insect-rich diet to thrive. And do not feed them bread and milk;
- provide shelter – just a pile of logs or twigs are sanctuary for hedgehogs, you can find plans to build or buy specially made hedgehog homes. In our garden we have built a 'dead hedge' this is an eco-friendly garden boundary constructed by packing woody prunings, branches, and sticks between two parallel rows of sturdy upright stakes. It acts as a sustainable, rustic barrier that recycles garden waste, provides instant shelter and habitats for beetles and insects, offer nesting sites for birds, and provide a corridor for small mammals like hedgehogs;
- prevent injury – check that fruit and sports nets are not too close to the ground, so hedgehogs won't get entangled in them. Always check bonfires before you light them. Use a proper incinerator or move the pile to be burnt just before setting fire to

it. And provide escape routes from deep water. Always check the whole area carefully before strimming, and cut long grass with care. Strimmers are one of the biggest causes of fatal or severely injuring hedgehog accidents, (similarly for frogs and toads) so even if you haven't noticed hedgehogs in your garden, always check thoroughly before cutting long grass. Be aware that this habitat can also be full of other creatures such as amphibians and smaller mammals;

- avoid old slug pellets - dig around in the back of the shed or garage to make sure you don't have any old metadehyde-based slug pellets lurking there. These are now banned due to their high toxicity to wildlife, so must be disposed of safely at your nearest recycling centre.

Gardening is a pastime which helps keep us fit and healthy in both mind and body. Wildlife gardening also lets us enjoy and connect to nature, bringing with it a host of benefits including a sense of well-being and improved mental resilience.

Something we can do, almost immediately, to help our gardens become more wildlife-friendly is take part in **No Mow May**. This encourages us to lock up our mowers for the month and let the grass grow and wildflowers bloom to provide pollen, nectar and shelter for insects and other wildlife. You can 'no mow' your whole lawn or just part of it. Leave it long until August, if possible, for maximum wildlife benefit. Even the smallest wild patch can provide vital food needed by pollinating insects such as hoverflies bees and butterflies, connecting us with nature and giving nature the best start to summer. A healthy lawn with some longer grass and wildflowers helps to tackle pollution, benefits wildlife and can even lock away carbon below the ground. The smallest grassy patches can add up and deliver enormous gains for nature, people and the climate. **No Mow May** participants have reported almost 100 species of pollinators on their lawns including 25 types of moth and butterfly, and 24 types of bee.

There are plenty of other jobs you can be getting on with whilst you are not mowing:

Jobs for April

- Sow hardy annuals and native wildflowers to fill gaps in borders.
- Deadhead spring bulbs like tulips but allow the foliage to die back before cutting.
- Keep a lookout for aphids appearing on roses, and deal with them quickly with an organic pesticide or warm soapy water before they get a chance to become an infestation.
- Add aquatic plants like irises and water lilies to ponds.
- Declare all-out war on the slugs with the first dose of a Nematode slug killer.
- Make sure your greenhouse is clean and mould-free, and open vents on warm days to promote good air circulation.
- There's still time to sow tender annuals like cosmos, nicotiana and marigolds in pots and modules, ready for planting out once the frosts are past for a fabulous summer display.
- As the soil starts to warm up, now is a good time to plant perennials for beautiful colour that will come back year after year.
- Sow sweet peas outdoors, and plant out winter-sown sweet pea seedlings.
- Tie climbing roses and clematis in to supports.
- Sow tomatoes, squashes and courgettes indoors.
- Plant second early potatoes in early April and maincrop potatoes towards the end of the month.
- Plant onions and shallots, and cover them with fleece for the first month to stop birds pulling up the young plants.
- Underplant slower veg crops with faster ones such as radishes to make good use of the space in your plot.
- Prune spring-flowering shrubs like forsythia once they've finished flowering, to keep them neat and to encourage flowering for next year.

Jobs for May

- Once the frosts are over, it's time to plant out dahlias and fill pots with colourful summer bedding (if you like that sort of thing)
- Harden off indoor-grown young plants for a week or two before planting them out, popping them outside during the day and bringing them back in at night.
- Feed and water houseplants regularly, and transplant any pot-bound plants into larger containers.
- Continue the war on weeds, hoeing beds and (if you have to) use herbicides specially designed for paths and patios.
- Be water wise – water plants early in the morning or in the evening, and install at least one rainwater butt.
- Check for nests before trimming shrubs – remember that it's illegal to disturb nesting birds.
- Wait until tulip, daffodil and bluebell foliage has died back before cutting. You can also lift and divide spring bulbs and replant them elsewhere for next season, and give your summer bulbs room to flourish.
- Water container plants regularly and feed fortnightly. Flowering plants will appreciate a high-potash feed once they start to bloom. Organic high-potash fertilizers, ideal for boosting fruit, flower, and root development (e.g., potatoes, tomatoes), include natural mineral sources like Sulphate of Potash (50% K₂O) wood ash, kelp meal, and potash-rich composts like comfrey. These organic options improve plant disease resistance and stress
- Protect your plants with slug traps (we have found a beer/malt extract concoction to be particularly effective) or go on a slug and snail hunt in the evenings.
- Earth up your early potatoes to maximise the yield.
- Sow salad crops every couple of weeks to get a continuous supply going.
- Sow courgettes, runner beans and french beans directly in the ground, or if the weather inclines to be cold plant in pots ready to plant out next month,
- Sow herb seeds such as basil indoors in pots and coriander and parsley seeds outdoors.
- Start hardening off tomato plants ready for planting outdoors in June.
- Don't mow the lawn

Dead Hedge



Duck House

