

Attracting wildlife to your garden

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Spring is a time when our gardens begin to awake from their winter slumber and it is certainly a busy time for wildlife. Amphibians such as frogs and toads make their way to ponds to breed and spawn and birds are frantically searching for a mate, a nest site or both.

Erecting a nest box in your garden is a valuable way of helping wildlife as these can make ideal sites for bird nests and in areas with few trees and shrubs for birds to construct natural nests they can be the difference between success and failure during the breeding season. Birds start looking for nesting sites in February and March so the earlier the boxes are installed the better as birds have longer to get used to them and hopefully you will be rewarded later in the season with birds successfully rearing broods of chicks in your garden.

Another very beneficial addition to your garden is provision of supplementary food. A wide range of seed, nuts and more specialist foods is now available and this will provide extra sustenance for adult birds which are working hard to feed their young. You can also use kitchen leftovers as long as you follow a few basic rules. Avoid spicy or salted foods and make sure to clean your bird table and feeders regularly to avoid spreading illness and disease. You should also ensure that birds always have access to fresh water.

Now is also a good time to sow wildflower seeds such as sunflower and teasel as these will provide natural seed food for birds in autumn and winter as well as adding colour and interest to your borders over the summer. If you want a bit of immediate impact why not treat yourself to a few pot grown wildflowers such as primroses, cowslips and fritillaries. These will brighten up any neglected corner of the garden and also look great in containers.

If you're feeling a bit more adventurous, you could create a log pile to give insects somewhere to escape the heat of the midday sun – a small rockery will also provide nooks and crannies for insects and may provide basking areas for slow worms and common lizard.

Gardens both big and small provide vital habitat for wild creatures and the earlier in the season you begin to transform your garden to a mini-nature reserve the more benefits you will see throughout the season.

Wildlife gardening tips: winter and early spring

This is a particularly difficult period for wildlife. So apart from putting out bird feed, how can you help your garden's wildlife? Here are a few ideas...

Leave seed heads on plants



Don't deadhead flowering plants until spring. The heads contain seeds and harbour over-wintering insects, both of which are important food sources for small birds such as this goldfinch.

Offer a windfall fruit feast



If you have fruit trees, leave windfalls to provide food for birds and small mammals in early winter. And the juice is a welcome drink when surface water is frozen. Put out any surplus or over-ripe stored fruit later in the winter when blackbirds, fieldfares and redwings will welcome the feast.

Grow early-flowering plants



Bees and butterflies emerge on sunny days from mid-February. Early-flowering plants, such as this 'winter' heather, provide them with nectar for an all-important energy boost.