

Wildlife gardening benefits people

By: *Erin McDaid*

Wildlife gardening is very much in vogue at the moment. Everyone seems to want to attract wildlife into their gardens and garden centres stock more and more products relating to wildlife. On a recent visit to my local garden centre I was surprised to see just how much space was devoted to wildlife gardening paraphernalia including nest boxes and bird food.

It is not too many years ago that garden centres simply stocked plants, seeds, pots, and other materials specifically linked to growing plants but now they stock everything from patio heaters to jacuzzis. This shift has been caused by a change in the way that people view their gardens and the motivation for buying a spa pool and bird table are, in my view, more closely linked than you might think.

Gardens have long been regarded as productive spaces, supplying food, flowers or a combination of both. For those with sufficient free time and disposable cash they have also been places of leisure, but for most of us our gardens are multi purpose – somewhere we grow things and where we spend a fair proportion of our leisure time. In more recent years the number of people taking an interest in their gardens has grown, but the balance between them being productive spaces or leisure areas has shifted. Many people want to spend time in their gardens but they don't necessarily want to spend all their time gardening. The garden, whether large or small has become an outdoor room, somewhere to relax and somewhere to unwind. It is this shift which I believe is partly responsible for the growth in interest in wildlife gardening.

In the past, conservationists have been keen to encourage more people to take an interest in wildlife gardening and they have generally sought to do this by stressing how important gardens are as a habitat for wildlife. We have pointed out that due to the loss of more natural habitat in the countryside, gardens are playing an increasingly important role in maintaining populations of creatures such as frogs and birds. Whilst this message has largely been successful, I think it is time to take a different approach.

Whilst there is no doubt that gardens are important for wildlife, I think it is time to stress the benefits of wildlife gardening for people. In 2005 the Wildlife Trusts and the Royal Horticultural Society conducted a wildlife gardening survey and people were asked to choose their favourite garden visitor. When asked why particular creatures were their favourites, around seventy five percent of respondents chose species that were colourful, pretty or entertaining. Less than five percent said that they chose their favourites because they were rare or helped to pollinate flowers. When asked to give more details about why they enjoyed seeing their most liked species, people gave answers such as "it cheers me up"; "it lifts my spirits and makes me feel happy" and "they entertain my toddler".

It doesn't really matter why people choose to help wildlife but in trying to encourage more people to get involved in wildlife gardening I think we should make much more effort to highlight the positive benefits for people. People get great pleasure from seeing wildlife in their gardens. Watching birds go about their business around the bird table or searching for newts in a wildlife pond are great stress busters and in today's fast paced society that is something to be lauded.

Wildlife gardening tips: late summer & autumn

Make a feature log pile



Although log piles provide useful cover for hibernating animals, many gardeners regard a log pile as untidy. But here's an idea to solve this problem: stack short logs to form a wall, like the S-shaped one pictured, to act as a feature in your garden, dividing planting areas or forming a background to a planting scheme.

Grow a mixed hedge



Autumn is an ideal time for planting hedging. Hedges do not have to be tightly clipped privet; in fact such hedges are quite poor wildlife habitats. Much better is a mixed hedge like that shown above, grown from native species such as hawthorn, holly and wild rose, perhaps bound with honeysuckle. It will offer cover for nesting birds and provide them with a good supply of insects and berries. And it will only need pruning once a year!