

Mini-nature reserves

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With natural habitats such as wildflower meadows and ancient woodlands being damaged and degraded at an alarming rate, domestic gardens are quickly becoming increasingly important as refuges for wildlife. Whilst more research is needed in order to establish exactly how gardens can best benefit wild plants and animals, their potential should not be underestimated. Together, the UK's fifteen million gardens cover around 270,000 hectares, an area greater than all of our designated National Nature Reserves put together.

In 2005, the Wildlife Trusts and the Royal Horticultural Society conducted a survey to find out more about garden wildlife as part of our joint Wild about Gardens initiative. Over 2000 people responded and the creature that topped the poll of favourites was the hedgehog, closely followed by 'birds'. The ever-popular robin came in at number three followed by frogs, butterflies, blackbirds and blue tits. The final places in the top ten went to ladybirds, bees and squirrels. Whilst the hedgehog may have topped the poll, the fact that so many birds were listed in the top ten suggests that our feathered friends are by far the most popular group of creatures that visit our gardens. In total, bird species accounted for almost fifty percent of all the votes cast.

Whilst seven of the creatures in the top ten eat garden pests, this was only the fourth most popular reason for choosing them. Species were much more likely to be chosen because of they were considered pretty, colourful or entertaining to watch, suggesting that people connect on an emotional level with wildlife that uses their gardens and feel affection for creatures that enhance their enjoyment of the outdoors.

In addition to simply enjoying the wildlife in their gardens, almost all respondents believed that 'gardeners should do more to support wildlife' and that 'gardeners can come to the rescue of species in decline'. The survey results also help to dispel the commonly held myth that gardening for wildlife means a messy and unsightly garden and gardeners also felt that having a small garden was no barrier to attracting wildlife. This assertion is supported by research carried out in Sheffield, which indicates that small gardens can be just as rich in wildlife as large ones and that those in built up areas can be of equal value to those in the suburbs.

Wildlife gardening tips: late summer and autumn

This is when many animals prepare for hibernation, so here are a few tips on how to give those in your garden a helping hand.

Install a hibernation box for ladybirds



Ladybirds are a boon to gardeners as both larvae and adults devour aphids! Adults hibernate over winter then lay eggs the next spring. They seek out dry stems to hibernate in, so a bundle of old garden cane pieces is ideal. Putting them in an open-ended box keeps out the worst of the winter weather.

Make a log pile



Small stacks of logs tucked under hedges or shrubs provide excellent cover for mammals (e.g. hedgehogs, shrews) and amphibians (e.g. frogs, toads) to hibernate.

Put a toad pot on your veg plot



Frogs and toads love to eat slugs, so where better to encourage them to live?