

Do not use fertilisers, weed killers or pesticides. If plants do need feeding, use compost made from the waste material produced by the wildlife area and kitchen waste. Most wildflowers grow best in poor soil because they then suffer less competition.

Hoeing or hand weeding is much more environmentally-friendly than using weed killers in a wildlife area. The latter can be harmful to insects feeding on the plants and animals higher up the food chain.

The aim in a wildlife garden is to achieve a balanced ecosystem where pests are controlled by their natural predators. Although nature sometimes seems not to be tackling this job very efficiently, it is far better to be patient and wait for the natural balance to be achieved than to seek quick results, which are likely to result in the overall loss of the wildlife.

**Conclusion** Creating and maintaining a wildlife area can be an enjoyable task for those taking part, and children who are involved are unlikely to forget their experience. Although an individual wildlife area only makes a small contribution to the wider natural environment, this contribution becomes progressively important as more and more such areas are created.

It is hoped that these guidelines will prove useful and encourage more wildlife areas to be created and maintained, incorporating some of the habitats referred to.

*All illustrations by Frances Wilding*

## Wycombe Wildlife Group

Among its activities Wycombe Wildlife Group surveys and promotes the management of wild habitats for the benefit of wildlife and advises on and promotes wildlife gardening.

**Information about the Group can be obtained from the Group's web site at: [www.wycombewildlife.org.uk](http://www.wycombewildlife.org.uk)**

## Creating and managing small wildlife areas



Setting aside small areas and managing them for the benefit of wildlife is

something that can be achieved in the grounds of schools, colleges and business premises, in open spaces with public access and in private gardens. As well as being of benefit to wildlife conservation, such areas provide a valuable learning resource.



All wildlife areas are individual and should each have a specific management plan. The guidance in this leaflet covers many of the issues likely to arise during their creation and ongoing maintenance and provides a baseline for a management plan if required.

**Trees and shrubs** The best trees for a wildlife area are existing mature native species but safety concerns often require action to be taken to reduce the risk of falling branches from older trees. When carrying out risk assessments, consider the feasibility of placing areas containing mature trees "out of bounds" during windy weather as an alternative to tree surgery. Where tree surgery has to be carried out, try to arrange for some dead standing or cut timber to be left for conservation purposes. When planting new trees, choose species suitable for the soil conditions, and always take account of the likely longer-term effects as the trees mature.

When planting new shrubs use native species if possible as these support more invertebrates and, in many cases, provide a natural food supply for mammals and birds. Keep pruning to a minimum, restricting maintenance to the autumn and winter months to avoid disturbance to nesting birds.

Areas near trees and shrubs provide opportunities for ground flora, which prefer shade and can cope with dry conditions.

**Hedges** Use native species when creating hedges or filling gaps. Hedges provide opportunities for growing climbers such as Honey-suckle and shade loving ground flora, which cannot cope with the very dry conditions under or near mature trees.

The best time to cut hedges is in the autumn or winter but remember that many hedgerow shrubs produce fruit which is an important winter food source for birds. If it is necessary to manage non-native hedge species more frequently, trim the outer new growth only, to avoid disturbing any nesting birds.



*Blackbird feeding on Bramble fruits*

**Grassland** Areas of long grass provide shelter for wildlife and the different grass species can be identified more easily if left uncut until after the inflorescence has gone to seed.

Spring meadows containing spring-flowering bulbs such as Daffodil and Fritillary and early-flowering plants such as Cowslip and Cuckooflower are best cut in June, when the seeds of flowering plants have dispersed and the leaves of bulbous plants have died down, and again in early autumn to remove the summer growth. All of the cut material should be removed and composted.

Summer meadows should only need a single cut in late August or early September after most of the plants have produced seed. In the case of newly created summer meadows, an additional cut in May is often needed until the nutrient levels have been reduced, by mowing and removing the cut material which should then be composted.

**Bramble patches** Bramble patches are valuable for wildlife as they provide a nectar source for invertebrates and a food supply for birds and small mammals. Mature patches also provide nesting sites for birds such as Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler and Blackcap. However brambles can be a problem in grassland where the stems root as they spread. Young rooted bramble stems can sometimes be pulled up, but well-rooted stems will need to be dug out or their growth controlled by regular cutting.



**Bird boxes and animal homes** Bird boxes and animal homes should be put in place in autumn ready for use for nesting or for hibernation. Good hygiene is essential to keep wildlife healthy, so used boxes and homes must be cleaned for re-use. If bat boxes are known to have been used, or there are indications that they might have been used, they need to be checked by a licensed bat handler before they can be removed for cleaning.

**Environmentally-friendly practices** Keep any watering required to a minimum and use rainwater saved in a water butt. Watering in the evening reduces moisture loss from evaporation.

When planting, soak the ground well the evening before and thoroughly wet the soil around the plants after planting. Thereafter, only water individual plants that appear to be stressed due to a lack of water. Plants will send roots down deeper into the soil if they are not watered, and they can then cope better in a dry spell. Frequent watering results in plants developing more surface roots which can quickly dry out in hot, dry weather.

When creating a new wildlife area or making major changes to an existing area in hot, dry locations, consider growing drought-resistant plants or growing plants in gravel to reduce water loss through evaporation. Mulching soil around shrubs can also slow down the rate at which the soil dries out on a hot day.



## Bog gardens

A bog garden is a useful feature in a wildlife area especially if a pond is considered to be a risk to children. Whilst a bog garden does not cater for aquatic fauna, it does enable many of the marginal pond plants to be grown, plus a number of additional species which like wet or damp soil but do not like to be permanently standing in water.



*Yellow Iris*

Once established, a bog garden can easily be damaged by trampling so, if it is too large to be managed from the edges, it is best to have stepping stones or a boardwalk from which any maintenance tasks can be carried out. Normally management can be restricted to the removal of excessive vegetation from the areas surrounding the bog garden, plus any vegetation within the bog garden which is adversely affecting the habitat as a whole or any of its flora. Maintenance of bog gardens should be kept to a minimum to avoid disturbance to their fragile ecosystems.

## Bird feeding areas

A bird table will be visited by most garden birds in search of food and, if food is put out at the same times each day, there will usually be plenty of birds in the vicinity waiting for their meal. A large range of bird feeders, catering for different types of bird food and different species of bird, can be purchased, or hand made. Squirrels can be a problem and even supposedly squirrel proof feeders do not always prove to be the complete deterrent. Whatever form your bird feeding station takes, it needs to be kept clean to reduce the risk of disease. Remember to wash your own hands well after carrying out such cleaning tasks.

Birds need water for drinking and bathing. A pond with shallow water and a gentle sloping edge is ideal for the purpose. A birdbath or a large plant saucer will suffice but will need to be kept topped up with fresh water and cleaned regularly.

Birds appreciate having places near to their feeding areas where they can move to quickly to shelter from predators. Trees, shrubs and hedges are all useful for this purpose.

## Nettle patches

Nettles can become invasive but they do provide larval food for several species of butterfly. These normally only lay their eggs where there are large patches of nettles, located in a sunny, sheltered place. There is no shortage of nettles and no particular conservation need for nettle patches to be included when wildlife areas are created. If a nettle patch is required, consider locating it in a suitable site away from the wildlife area so that it can be managed separately.

To ensure a constant supply of young nettles, it is recommended that nettle patches be cut on a two-year rotational basis in autumn and the cut material removed and composted. Nettles may be supporting butterfly eggs, larvae or pupae at any time during the period from mid April to late September.

## Growing wildflowers

When choosing flowering plants for a wildlife area, take account of their suitability and optimum growing requirements. Some flowering plants like plenty of sun and some need shade. Some plants require wet soil, some like it damp and others will only succeed in well-drained or even dry conditions. Some plants prefer or will only grow in acid soil whereas others prefer alkaline soil. Some will tolerate rich soil whilst others only do well in poor soil.

Whilst native plants are the most suitable for wildlife areas, many garden plants are rich in nectar and produce seeds and thus also have a wildlife value.

Flowers can be grown in existing grassland but this can be difficult if the grass has been improved by fertilisers or if vigorous grass species are present. Where an area of grassland has few or no flowering plant species and the grass grows rapidly, it has probably been 'improved' and then it is usually best to remove both the turf and topsoil, prepare the subsoil, and purchase and sow an appropriate wildflower and grass mix. If wildflowers are already growing in the area, or if the grassland comprises mainly soft grass species, converting it into a wildflower meadow will be much easier.



*Peacock and Small Tortoiseshell on Butterfly-bush (Buddleja davidii)*

Where wildflowers are grown in cultivated beds or borders, standard gardening practices such as supporting and deadheading plants can easily be undertaken as and when required. Leave seed heads on plants at the end of the summer to provide a food source for seed-eating birds in the winter months. Leaving the old growth on perennial plants also provides some protection for the plants if there is a succession of hard frosts in winter, and for the new growth as it emerges in spring. Collecting some of the ripe seeds and sowing them in pots or seed trays is an economic way of increasing plant numbers. With some species, sowing the seed as soon as possible after collection results in faster germination. Alternative ways of producing additional plants are to leave the best of any seedlings as they appear or to pot-up large seedlings for growing-on and planting out when established. Frequent weeding may be necessary around plants producing large quantities of freely germinating seeds.



*Wild Marjoram*

**Ponds** Maintenance of wildlife ponds should be kept to a minimum as disturbance adversely affects the balanced ecosystem of an established healthy pond.

Do not introduce fish to a wildlife pond as they will eat most water fauna. Similarly do not encourage ducks to your pond as they will eat the vegetation, especially the submerged oxygenating plants, and pollute the water.

Tap water used to top up the water level and nutrients washed in from the surrounding soil can increase the amount of blanket weed, algae and duckweed. Excessive amounts should be removed and composted: in the case of a small pond, a fishing net can be used. If tools such as rakes are used, care must be taken to avoid damaging the pond liner. In a large pool, it may be necessary to enter the water to undertake such tasks and care needs to be taken if the pond has varying depths or sloping contours. It is often difficult to see the bottom if mud is disturbed and sloping liners are very slippery. Barley straw can be an effective natural control of blanket weed but it provides only a temporary solution.

Dying vegetation can be removed and plants cut back if required in late autumn. Whilst excessive vegetation can be removed at this time, avoid disturbance to the marginal vegetation or to the sediment at the bottom of the ponds as far as possible. If it is necessary to remove marginal vegetation, disturbance can be reduced by removing one or two sections of the old vegetation at a time. Removed plant clumps can be divided and some of the younger material replanted if required. Dead leaves should be removed carefully and composted as large quantities of decaying pond leaves can increase the nutrient levels in a pond. However too much disturbance of the bottom mud can release more nutrients than leaving it undisturbed. Removal of any of the bottom sediment will destroy some of the wildlife of the pond, so if it is necessary to remove some of the bottom sludge, it is preferable to deal with small areas at intervals when carrying out other pond maintenance tasks. Whenever any pond vegetation or sediment is removed, it is a good idea to leave it at the side of the pond for a couple of days to allow some of the wildlife to escape back into the water. It is also a much easier and cleaner job to take the partially dried material to the compost heap.



*Southern Hawker dragonfly*



*Blue-tailed Damselfly*

Pond maintenance is a very dirty job and it is advisable to wear old clothes and waterproof or long-sleeved pond gloves. To reduce the associated health risks, cuts should be covered with waterproof plasters, and exposed skin coming into contact with pond water should be washed thoroughly with clean water. It is essential to wash before eating or drinking and avoid touching the mouth or eyes whilst undertaking any pond maintenance tasks.