Designing and Gardening for Wildlife Made Easy

Article by Francoise Elvin, Autumn 2017

This article was inspired by a talk given by local naturalist John Walters in the autumn of 2017. Many people want to know the best way to 'do their bit' in the garden to reverse the global trend of habitat destruction. We shouldn't under-estimate the value to wildlife of the mosaic of gardens up and down the country. There are many pro-active ways of becoming a positive part of this vibrant mosaic yourself, and some of them may in fact involve doing less, not more... The tidier and more regimented a garden, the less friendly it is for wildlife. Don't be afraid to leave some areas a bit wilder. If you think in terms of 'zones' in the garden, it's often best to keep the bits closest to the house tidiest, (to cater for the OCD in us!) and then the farther towards the boundary, the wilder the garden can become... This will help it to blend in with the wider landscape, if you live in the country, or to screen the neighbours, if you live in the town. It will also provide shelter and food for birds, insects and small mammals.

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Purple flowering Pulmoria – good bee foraging in spring

Avoid the temptation to pave over the front garden to park the car. It will cost several £1000s for a start. Imagine how many hours of local gardening labour you could pay for with that money, supporting a local skilled tradesperson, and contributing to habitat creation or retention. If you're looking for small trees for the front garden, so they don't steal too much light from the house, some of my favourites include weeping silver pear (Pyrus pendula salicifolia), Sorbus aucuparia and its cultivars (Rowan) and Cornus alternifolia argentea, with its delicate horizontal branches and small leaves. Columnar trees are also good at not taking up too much space or light. Did you know that oak and beech are available as columnar specimens? They will eventually get quite big, but they don't grow all that fast and so would be suitable for a medium sized front garden. There're always the pencil thin Cyprus trees if you fancy an air of the Mediterranean around your place, or simply like the drama of vertical accents, and of course columnar cherries have the benefit of blossom.

Marginal planting on damp ground (candelabra primulas) with multi-stem Himalayan birch

There's a small cherry (not columnar) with interesting bark that would also fit the bill: Prunus serrula. Its shiny coppery bark will provide a treat from the house in winter. It would contrast beautifully with the pure white bark of another small to medium sized tree – the Himalayan birch, Betula utilis var. Jacquemontii. Both these latter are deciduous, meaning that as the leaves fall in autumn, more light is let in to any nearby windows. The birch is often available as a 'multi stem' specimen, emphasising the qualities of the beautiful bark even more. Another small tree with Spring blossom and autumn leaf colour, but no spectacular bark, unfortunately, is Amelanchier lamarckii. With so many small trees to choose from, there's no excuse not to plant at least one.

But let's not get too obsessed with trees (easily done on my part I'm afraid!) ... When we think globally, we can't help but consider the carbon footprint of the garden. That means looking at the embodied energy of the materials we're using to create the hard landscape features. We need to consider how far have they've travelled, how have they have been sourced and harvested, how the primary producers have been treated and paid, how polluting and energy intensive was the manufacture process? If we're prepared to ask a few awkward questions, we're raising awareness and being ambassadors for

the type of consumer that makes board room directors rethink their strategies (eventually, hopefully) ...They'll only do this if we remain vocal on these thorny issues. The eco-logical choice is to source materials close to home, or to reclaim things, giving them a second lease of life. Often this approach creates a sympathetic finish. Local materials will fit better with the traditional architecture in the area, and reclaimed objects already have a charm and a worn quality all of their own. The Japanese have a term for this: Wabi-sabi. It's a combination of aesthetics and ecology, where repairing things, and living within one's means creates a felt sense of intimacy and cohesion which is so often absent in modern design... See the Zen garden project in the south of France on my website greenmantlegardens.com for more inspiration on employing Wabi-sabi principles in garden design.

Bees in profusion on the lavender

Gardening ecologically also means closing the loops or systems in the garden to make it more self-sustaining. Having your own compost heap and leaf mould is a satisfying way to reduce outside inputs, and therefore your carbon footprint. The two rules I stick to with compost making are: don't put weeds that have run to seed on the heap, as you will spread weed seeds on the garden next year. The second rule is to mix wet and dry materials. It's a bit like the human gut – you need roughage to keep it loose and friable. So grass clippings on their own will go slimy. Add more twiggy material, and let nature do the rest ...

Leaf mould should be made separately – it's not compost as such, in that it's quite nutrient poor (and fibre rich) which gives it a good open structure...useful as a growing medium in pots, with added nutrient. Wood ash in a 1:10 ratio provides this. You could add a bit of sand, grit or loam to give it more weight, but that's not essential, especially if you raked up bits of grit with the leaves. They need to be moist to rot down, so should be heaped up and watered if really dry. Dumpy bags from builder's merchants and even large sacks can also be used. It's also a great mulch for shrubs, with or without the added nutrient, suppressing weeds and keeping in moisture (rhododendrons and hydrangeas love it), mimicking in fact the forest floor conditions that many of our shrubs as sub-canopy specimens would be used to in the wild.

When planting a garden, choose open flowers that can easily be reached into by bees. For example the French lavender stoechas with tufty ears is pretty but doesn't attract bees in the same way the traditional varieties do. Aim to have nectar-providing flowers for bees, butterflies and insects throughout as many seasons of the year as possible. Plant bulbs in the autumn for early spring interest, such as snowdrops, native crocus tommasinianus, grape hyacinths (muscari), snake's head fritillaries with their chessboard plum-coloured markings, and daffodils (February Gold is an early variety). All of these will naturalise in a lawn or other wild places provided they are not mown back too soon after flowering. Lungworts, or pulmonarias, are early flowering ground cover plants suitable for semi-shade that give much needed forage for bees in early spring. At this time of year, blossom on trees is also very useful. One of the first flowering trees to make an impact in the spring is Prunus cerasafera, or cherry plum. It often flowers just before, or at the same time as the leaves emerge, and the leaves are a dark purple colour... it's a very attractive small to medium-sized tree providing early forage for bees, the pale delicate blossom contrasting with the sultry leaves. Another tree, flowering even earlier and suitable for the smallest garden, is witch hazel, which is available with yellow and burnt orange flowers that unfurl from tightly coiled spirals.

Lavandula x intermedia 'Grosso'

The summer has a profusion of flowers, such as marjoram – a fabulous plant that attracts bees and butterflies, has a very long flowering season, is disease and drought tolerant and comes in different leaf colours...What not to like? To extend visual and wildlife interest into the autumn, add asters, heleniums, rudbeckias and sedums. All of these are clump forming herbaceous perennials requiring full sun, which can be cut back in early winter to re-emerge the following Spring... As the Autumn wears into Winter, the flowering range decreases. Ivy is useful at this time of year not only for providing nectar and pollen for bees, but also shelter for birds when the deciduous trees have lost their leaves. Attractive

shrubs for the Winter garden are Mahonia 'Charity' and Viburnum 'Bodnantense'. These reach a good size (2-3m) and are blessed with wonderful scent. Fantastic colour is provided closer to the ground in winter by the heather Erica Darlyensis, which has the advantage of being able to grow in neutral soil (most heathers require acid soil). Why not visit the RHS garden Rosemoor, in north Devon, which has a wonderful Winter garden to inspire and inform?

Rowan Berries – bird food for autumn

Help can also be given in the winter to insects, including bees, by creating 'bug hotels'. These can actually look very decorative, and are formed from bits of bamboo and other vegetation to provide hollows, nooks and crannies for insects to hibernate. Solitary bees will even lay their eggs in hollow stems. Position these bug hotels in a warm sunny spot, as bees require warmth in the autumn and spring as they go into and out of hibernation. Try to leave bits of the garden un-cleared in winter as all sorts of mini-refuges, including hollow stems, will be inhabited by small creatures.

Long grass, which would probably be zoned farther from the house, in a wilder area, supports small rodents, a food source for birds of prey such as owls... Meadow creation is an art and a science and needs to be researched both for preparation, establishment and maintenance... Often a layer of the top soil will need to be removed to inhibit the growth of lush grass species which will, in effect, out -compete the more delicate wild flowers. There are many traditional species that will grow in a lawn if it's left to go wild including buttercup, yarrow, self-heal, birdsfoot trefoil, ox-eye daisy, scabious and vetch. We can help create a more pictorial meadow with the addition of some cranesbill geraniums – Johnson's blue is a good one to try, and Gladiolus byzantinus will provide a splash of electric pink in mid to late spring. Cyclamen can also extend the season of interest for your 'flowery mead'...C. 'hederifolium' in autumn, and the more delicate, brighter C. 'coum' in spring, with smaller rounder leaves. Try naturalising these under trees, since they like the dry, shallow soil found there. Taller specimens for wild areas include furry, grey leaved mullein, with its yellow flowers, important for moths. Also teasels, very architectural and attractive to gold finches... Not to forget foxgloves, beloved of bees, and now available in many shades including apricot and white drawing the eye in semi-shade...They are biennial, so the basal rosettes establish from late summer in the first year to flower in year 2. I had a French boyfriend once I was trying to teach English. I pointed to the foxglove and looked at him quizzically...He furrowed his brow, and then suggested comically: 'wolf sleeves?'! Whatever you call it – just plant it!

If you wish to encourage birds of all sorts, as well as positioning feeders high up close to the house... simply choose not to have a cat, and allow small piles of logs and twigs to rot down unobtrusively, under a hedge for example, or in a woodland type area. These encourage invertebrates, which form the bottom of the food chain and are fed on by wild birds. With the addition of some leaves, they also provide a winter hotel environment for slowworms and hibernating hedgehogs, who will also appreciate you leaving small gaps at the bottom of fences, granting them amnesty, and 'the right to roam'...

Position bug hotels in warm sunny position to attract hibernating bees

Try to avoid using slug pellets. Create gravel paths or small trenches around raised beds and scatter coarse salt in amongst. The slugs won't cross it. You can also crush slugs and snails or chop them in half, or tip them in a pan of boiling water... Killing them is not pleasant, but if it means we can reduce food miles, by growing at least some of our own produce, and avoid poisoning ourselves, hedgehogs and birds, then it has to be done. You don't need to mount a pan-garden campaign; they won't do any harm in woodland type areas, only when one is attempting to establish delicate seedlings, including vegetables and flowers. Another tactic is to use well established and hardened-off modules grown by a local nursery (in south Devon Hillhouse provide a wide selection)

which should be over the most vulnerable stage... If you throw molluscs into a neighbouring field or garden, they will simply come back, possibly with an angry neighbour tacked on! Choose varieties of plants that are slug tolerant. Avoid growing Hostas and Delphiniums, for example... there are so many beautiful plants to choose from that are not so susceptible to slug damage. As a rule of thumb, the thicker, more leathery the leaf, and the more aromatic the plant, the more likely the slug is to give it a body swerve (literally!)

Let me help you create a well-designed garden:
a world within a world

Ponds are a great way to increase bio-diversity in a garden. Goldfish are not recommended as they eat larvae of any wildlife attempting to colonise. Make sure (if it's a formal pond with vertical sides) that you heap up stones all the way to the surface and the edge in at least one place for frogs to get in and out. Frogs prefer shallow water. Deep water invites newts, great wildlife, yes, but they predate on frogspawn, so you may have to choose to favour one or the other. In an informal pond, a shingle beach will provide another habitat for

Wabi-sabi design principles in a Zen garden – South of France

invertebrates. The inclusion of boggy ground on the margins allows for the planting of colourful, lush schemes, giving cover to wildlife. Moisture-loving plants include bronze leaved Rodgersias, Astilbe, Arum lilies, Flag iris, cerise pink Candelabra primulas, King cups and Skunk cabbage to name but a few...

Choosing the right plant for the right place is a cornerstone of ecological gardening because less energy and artificial inputs are needed to make it thrive. Choose disease-resistant varieties with everything you buy for the garden, as far as possible, and look for the AGM on the label – this means the 'award of garden merit' has been furnished, an accolade from the RHS (Royal Horticultural Society) denoting the plant has undergone rigorous trials and proven itself as a robust, garden-worthy specimen.

The pioneering gardener Beth Chatto has written a number of books, now modern classics, for the garden enthusiast, including 'The Gravel Garden' and 'The Woodland Garden'... Her late husband Andrew Chatto was a plant ecologist, and she used his understanding of plant communities in the wild to replicate native habitats in a decorative way. This is another aspect of zoning...We are not just creating garden 'rooms' (gratuitously?) for our aesthetic pleasure, but also attempting to create viable plant colonies or mini ecosystems that can be virtually self-sustaining. Remember:- a woodland has a canopy, then a sub-canopy layer, then ground cover, and climbers that use trunks of other species to access light ... Plant decoratively to replicate nature with species found similarly in the wild, and you can't go far wrong. When you divide up your space ask yourself what kind of 'zone' is it? Even if you know nothing about plant communities in the wild, when you go shopping for plants, see if you can imagine what kind of habitat you are mimicking in your garden. Of course, sometimes we just want flounce and formality and not to be reminded of wilderness, but the best gardens and designs should be able to move effortlessly and skilfully between wild and tame areas. A garden is an intervention in the wilderness. If left untended, it will revert in a very short time span. It's actually humbling and fascinating to see how quickly nature will re-colonise, even on top of tarmac. Leaves, left undisturbed, turn into soil that small plants seed into. These enable more leaves to congregate, then a tree seeds into the thickening soil and its roots slowly but surely penetrate and crack the tarmac. Even a thin layer of soil on top of man-made surfaces will support a covering of green in no time, starting with algae and moss. A garden is a patch of land borrowed in space and time from the earth – a being of such largesse that the fact we've borrowed it for a while escapes us all too often. Let's humble ourselves a bit, let's pay homage, let's 'doff our caps' to the creatures of the earth by offering refuge and sanctuary to them. After all, we borrowed our garden off them in the first place!