

Gardening to Conserve Wildlife

Chris Gibson, who advises government teams on wildlife, biodiversity and landscapes and is a member of the Wildlife Gardening Forum, came to talk to us about how we can best manage our gardens to conserve wildlife. In recent years we have lost half of our wildlife habitat because it has been concreted over, ploughed up or over-fertilized. This means that gardens have become a most important haven for the birds, butterflies, moths and other creatures that have been driven from their former homes.

We can increase food and shelter for wildlife if we think about the types of plants we choose. Some of the most showy flowering plants provide nothing in the way of food for birds and insects, whereas hellebores, Michaelmas daisies and guelder roses provide nutrition in autumn and winter when other plants are dying off. Creating a pond will give water to many creatures; they also shelter frogs and toads which will eat slugs and insect pests so that you can reduce your use of harmful pesticides. Dragonflies like permanent ponds and also eat harmful insects. If you leave dead foliage and stems, especially hollow ones, throughout the winter, these will give shelter to many useful species. Even a bundle of sticks can provide a home for lacewings, ladybirds and aphids. Lelandii, if you keep them cut to about two metres, make good nesting sites. Contrary to popular myth, ivy does not kill trees, but it does give nesting, roosting and hibernating sites and nectar for butterflies and hover-flies. We should preserve ivy rather than cut it down, as it gives both shelter and food in winter. After the ivy berries are eaten, their place can be taken by mahonia.

We need the whole life cycle in the garden so it is better to make your own compost than to put waste in the green bin. Compost heaps and dead wood are a good habitat for bumble bees, hedgehogs and for the eggs of grass snakes to hatch.

We need to be aware that with climate change, droughts will become more frequent, though there may be very heavy rainfall at other times. Water shortages will become an increasing difficulty. We should choose water-tolerant plants and plan for more water-butts to conserve rainfall. We should grow fewer delphiniums and hybrid tea-roses and choose instead drought-tolerant plants such as lavenders, salvias, sages and sea-hollies. Some species help each other, such as carrots and alliums and we should be thinking about the advantages of companion planting.

Gardens are a vital resource to protect our increasingly threatened wildlife and we are grateful to Chris Gibson for his advice on how to plan our gardens for maximum benefit to wild creatures.