

# How to: Choose wildlife gardening jobs through the year



Spring to winter photos in Steve Head's garden

*Lots of wildlife gardening jobs need to be done at particular times of year. This guide will help you know what to do in the different months and seasons.*

**Target species:** You – and everything in your garden! We want to help you plan your gardening through the year, so you can best help your garden's wild plants and wildlife.

## **How easy is it to do?**

Very easy. Just use the guide to help prioritise your gardening projects and maintenance.

## **How to do it**

Look at the list at the end of this leaflet. There are lots of suggestions, so you won't have time or energy for them all. Prioritise what seems best for you and your garden especially if there are groups of creatures you particularly want to help. You will find guidance for most of these activities in the rest of our ["How to" guides](#).

## **How much will it cost?**

Nothing extra – but we hope the list will help you make the best and most economic use of your time.

## **How effective is it for the target species?**

Very helpful for you and your garden's wildlife.

## Golden rules – what the science tells us

- The monthly activities below are only a guide, based around south-central England. In the south-west timings can be a week or so earlier, while in the north of Britain and Ireland spring and summer arrive later, while autumn and winter may be earlier. Similar differences can be seen with increasing altitude
- No two year's weather are the same. Look on the lists of tasks as a guideline and be prepared to adjust them according to the weather. In many cases a month either way will still be appropriate

## What to look for?

If you use our wildlife calendars to track the appearance of flowers and animals in your garden, it will help you to assess whether the season where you live is early, late or on time.

## Things to be aware of

Some of the activities listed may seem more like ordinary gardening but remember [all of your garden](#) is important for wildlife, and so it is perfectly acceptable to grow flowers, fruit and vegetables for your own benefit.

Some jobs are more or less continuous through the year. These could include providing food and water for birds and keeping feeders/ birdbaths clean, adding to your compost heap, making a bug hotel, providing water for birds and keeping birdbaths clean?

There are *lots* more projects you could experiment with, and many are not very dependent on the time of year. Read through our [“How-to” guides](#) for inspiration.

## January

### General

- Clean and service gardening tools - you'll need them in good working soon!
- Look round the garden while it is bare, take photos and decide on parts that need a rethink or new planting
- Check that hedgehogs can find a way through your fences, and make a couple of holes if they can't
- Put up a bat box if you have a tree in your garden or nearby

### Birds

- Birds need plenty of calories, offer them [http://www.wlgf.org/ht\\_feed\\_birds.pdf](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_feed_birds.pdf) oily seeds and fat balls, whole peanuts are good until nesting begins
- Keep bird baths ice-free in cold weather
- Buy and set up [nest boxes](#) for spring bird breeding
- Sign up to take part in the [BTO Garden Birdwatch](#) through the year
- Count for one hour during the RSPB three- day [Big Garden Birdwatch](#) in late January

### Plants

- Choose and buy seeds; start sowing seeds indoors to plant out later in spring

## February

### *General*

- The coldest month in the year, *melt* holes in frozen ponds to allow air exchange, *don't* hit the ice to break it, shock waves can damage small animals.
- Clear dead plant material from your beds and compost it
- Put compost or manure on flower beds to break down ready for spring
- Join Butterfly Conservation's [Garden Butterfly Survey](#)

### *Birds*

- Add mealworms to your energy-rich bird food, to build their strength with protein
- Stop putting out whole peanuts for birds by the end of the month as nestlings will soon appear and could be choked

### *Plants*

- This is the last chance to plant bare-rooted trees, shrubs and hedges. Cut back and/or lay your garden hedge before nesting starts, and finish pruning fruit trees and shrubs.
- Trim back excessive climbing ivy before nesting starts



*Early spring flowers like these native daffodils are joyful and essential in the garden but many aren't very helpful for wildlife*

Photo: gailhampshire via Wikimedia Commons

## March

### *General*

- It's now OK to remove dead stems and flowerheads that you left so birds could harvest seeds over winter
- Weed your flower and vegetable beds before plant growth gets going in spring
- Mulch flower beds with a thick layer of organic material such as compost
- Clean out dead or excessive foliage and accumulated winter rubbish from ponds but look out for amphibians!
- Help your children learn about plants by sowing radishes outside – they crop very quickly and fascinate children if you tell them radishes promote burping

### *Birds*

- Leave twigs and moss near bird feeders for nest building, you can buy nesting wool hangers to put out for birds

### *Insects*

- When weeding, leave useful food plants such as garlic mustard for orange-tip butterflies

- Put up [solitary bee nests](#) (hotels) etc. Early March is ideal in the south if weather is mild – late March for further north. Face them south in a sunny spot, and ensure they are protected from rain with an overhanging roof that deflects water and keeps the entrances of the nest tubes dry.
- Consider investing in an electric moth trap which opens your eyes to the amazing beauty and variety of moths in your garden. You could then join Butterfly Conservation's [National Moth Recording Scheme](#) which collects invaluable data on how our moths are getting on

#### *Plants*

- Start an [annual or cornfield meadow](#) on a bare bed by sowing annual flowering seed mixes without grass
- Cut dogwood, elders and buddleia right back to encourage fresh attractive growth for wildlife
- Plant first outdoor sowing of hardy vegetables, wildlife benefit from vegetable patches
- Sow wild flower seeds in trays and grow on as plug plants for planting out in autumn
- Sow runner beans, courgettes and squash in pots in the warmth

## April

#### *General*

- Remove spring blanket weed from ponds using a plastic lawn rake or twisted round a cane
- Mow an established summer meadow in early April to hold back grasses and vigorous plants

#### *Birds*

- Keep feeding birds as they prepare to nest, as the natural supply of berries and seeds has largely gone. No whole peanuts unless in enclosed feeders!
- Put out clean dry egg shells for birds needing a calcium boost for egg production
- Supply live mealworms as birds begin to feed their chicks

#### *Insects*

- Watch out for queen wasps starting new nests – block entrance while she's away only if it will cause problems for people in summer.

#### *Plants*

- Sow sunflower seeds which do better with a late sowing
- Plan and begin to plant a herb garden area which is great for your cooking and for pollinating insects. Include perennial marjoram, mint, borage, rosemary, chives, thyme and lavender, and later plant annual coriander and biennial parsley

# May

## *General*

- No mow May! – let the lawn grow to help wildflowers and insects
- Keep on top of weeds in the flower and veg beds
- Tend all your growing seedlings!

## *Birds*

- International Dawn Chorus Day is 1<sup>st</sup> May
- Watch to find where birds are nesting so you and your children can avoid disturbing them

## *Plants*

- Pinch out tips of broad beans to reduce aphid attack – don't use insecticides!

# June

## *General*

- Why not extend no-mow May into June?
- Enjoy sitting and watching the wildlife you have been encouraging
- Join the [Stag Beetle Count](#) which runs in June and July
- Only weed enough to let your favoured plants grow well – “weeds” are good for wildlife
- Start watering if necessary, but only water at the base of individual plants
- Soon tiny frogs will emerge from ponds. Look out for them and avoid mowing when they are on the move

## *Birds*

- Make sure bird feeders stay clean and don't let food go stale in hot weather
- Buy a bird bath if you haven't got one and keep it filled and clear of algae

## *Plants*

- Plant out the tender annuals and other plants you have brought on in the shelter of the greenhouse.
- Now frosts have gone plant out runner beans and squash
- Take [softwood cuttings](#) to propagate herbaceous plants



*Stag beetles are our biggest and most impressive beetle and its worth looking out for them in June and July*

Photo: by Syrio, via Wikimedia Commons

# July

## *General*

- Take out aggressive weed growth. Watch out for caterpillars before pulling out unwanted plants
- Be generous and let cabbage white caterpillars feed on one or two of your brassica crops

## *Birds*

- Continue providing water for birds

## *Plants*

- Collect ripe wildflower seed sparingly from local meadows – but don't uproot the plants!
- Buy wildflower plugs to pot on and plant in your meadow area in the autumn
- Deadhead plants to encourage longer flowering
- Sow biennial plants like foxgloves, honesty and wallflowers in pots to plant out later for next year's flowering

# August

## *General*

- Mow your flowering meadows after seeds have been released. Leave the cuttings and turn after a couple of days to ensure the seeds are spread back into the meadow and after which collect and compost the "hay"- don't let it rot on the surface. But before you do, agitate the long grass to alert young toads, frogs and slow worms so they have time to move away before you mow.

## *Birds*

- You don't need to feed birds – there is lots of natural food unless there's a long drought
- Continue to put water out for birds and other wildlife, especially if it is hot

## *Plants*

- Collect ripe wildflower seed from local meadows – but don't uproot the plants!

# September

## *General*

- It is a good plan to rake your wildflower meadow to create gaps for flower seeds to germinate. After this, sow [yellow rattle](#) to reduce grass dominance, then plant out your pots of wildflower plug plants. Yellow rattle can be sown right through to December.
- Collect some windfall fruit for freezing as apple sauce but leave plenty for the birds.
- Take out a lot of the new plant growth from your pond (including a proportion of submerged pondweed) and remove any dead material. This will lower the overall nutrient level in your pond and reduce the likelihood of blanket weed next season. Lay the material on the side of the pond for 24 hours so some animals (but not many) can escape and crawl back into the pond.

- Consider buying an electric chipper which will turn smaller woody garden waste into excellent mulch to compost. Don't mix un-composted chipped wood with the soil. Make log piles with thicker pieces. Another excellent solution is to create a "dead hedge".

#### *Plants*

- Stop dead-heading flowers so birds can use the seeds
- Order spring-flowering bulbs for the lawn and flower beds, plan where to put them



*The Guelder rose has attractive flowers and abundant berries in Autumn. It's a good choice for a mixed-species hedge, but although flowers and berries are loved by wildlife, the berries taste bitter and are slightly toxic for us.*

Photo: Wouter Hagens via Wikimedia Commons

## October

#### *General*

- If you are up for a big project, this is the best month to [create a wildlife pond](#)
- Look out for a diversity of fungi, but don't eat anything you aren't sure of
- Put out food for hedgehogs fattening up for hibernation. NOT bread and milk!

#### *Birds*

- Clean out old nest boxes, see [RSPB advice](#)

#### *Plants*

- Plant a [multi-species hedge](#) if you haven't already got one to replace or grow through a garden wire fence
- Consider planting native shrubs like blackthorn, hawthorn and guelder rose for berries for birds
- Plant bare-root trees, shrubs and soft fruit to establish in the moist soils of autumn – you can continue until February
- Plant spring flowering bulbs in beds and in the lawn under trees
- Clean out dying vegetable plants and weed around spring brassicas.
- Divide herbaceous perennials that are too big and replant or give them to friends or put in local authority green waste collection. Do not dump unwanted divisions of garden plants in wild situations outside gardens where they could compete with struggling native plants.

- Dig up and pot or replant self-seeded plants you want to move elsewhere or give to friends.
- Move tender plants into the greenhouse to over-winter

## November

### *General*

- Remove excess dead material from flower beds but leave seed heads for birds. Watch out for sleepy toads, newts and slow worms, especially under logs or large stones, and in rockeries.
- Leave dead leaves and twigs in dark corners and under hedges for hibernation sites
- If you have an excess of dead leaves collect and bag them up to make leaf compost
- If you need to have a bonfire (if allowed in local regulations) check there are no sleepy hedgehogs or slow worms first.
- Mulch your vegetable areas with manure or compost to suppress weeds and break down through the winter and improve fertility
- Rake leaves into the borders to act as mulch and slowly compost
- Continue to remove dead leaves that fall into your pond
- Dig out new beds, removing deep rooted weeds

### *Birds*

- Start feeding birds as the natural fruits and seeds of autumn are used up.
- The breeding season is over, and you can provide whole peanuts and other large pieces of food

### *Plants*

- Sow overwintering broad beans and Japanese onion sets for an early start in spring
- Mulch your perennials with compost

## December

### *General*

- Cut back diseased or unwanted growth of shrubs and trees
- Prune [apple and pear](#) trees

### *Birds*

- Provide plenty of food and water for birds

### *Plants*

- Look at our [guides on plants for pollinators](#). Plan to grow plants to [flower all through the year](#)
- Have fun curling up with seed catalogues on grey winter days and list seeds to grow in spring

- Buy a (small) Christmas tree with a root-ball you can keep alive outdoors in a pot for next year

## Further information

### Our website

Planting [yellow rattle](http://www.wlgf.org/rhinanthus.html) [www.wlgf.org/rhinanthus.html](http://www.wlgf.org/rhinanthus.html)

[All of your garden](http://www.wlgf.org/one_bit.html) is used by wildlife [www.wlgf.org/one\\_bit.html](http://www.wlgf.org/one_bit.html)

[How to Guides](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_intro.html) - read for inspiration [www.wlgf.org/ht\\_intro.html](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_intro.html)

### *Pdf documents you can read and download*

How to choose [Plants for pollinators](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_use_plants.html) [www.wlgf.org/ht\\_use\\_plants.html](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_use_plants.html)

How to: Create a [bed of annual flowers](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_annual_bed.pdf) for wildlife [www.wlgf.org/ht\\_annual\\_bed.pdf](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_annual_bed.pdf)

How to: [Feed garden birds](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_feed_birds.pdf) [www.wlgf.org/ht\\_feed\\_birds.pdf](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_feed_birds.pdf)

How to: [Create and maintain ponds](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_ponds.pdf) for wildlife [www.wlgf.org/ht\\_ponds.pdf](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_ponds.pdf)

How to: [Create and maintain hedges](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_hedges.pdf) [www.wlgf.org/ht\\_hedges.pdf](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_hedges.pdf)

How to: Create and maintain [bee hotels](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_bee_hotel.pdf) [www.wlgf.org/ht\\_bee\\_hotel.pdf](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_bee_hotel.pdf)

### Other sites

RHS guide to [hard fruit tree pruning](http://www.rhs.org.uk/fruit/apples/pruning-made-easy) [www.rhs.org.uk/fruit/apples/pruning-made-easy](http://www.rhs.org.uk/fruit/apples/pruning-made-easy)

RHS guide to taking [softwood cuttings](http://www.rhs.org.uk/propagation/softwood-cuttings) [www.rhs.org.uk/propagation/softwood-cuttings](http://www.rhs.org.uk/propagation/softwood-cuttings)

BTO [Garden Birdwatch](http://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/gbw/about) [www.bto.org/our-science/projects/gbw/about](http://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/gbw/about)

BTO on [nest boxes](http://www.bto.org/about-birds/nbw/buy-a-box) [www.bto.org/about-birds/nbw/buy-a-box](http://www.bto.org/about-birds/nbw/buy-a-box)

RSPB [Big Garden Birdwatch](https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch?utm_source=bbcwebsite&utm_medium=online&utm_content=bgbwlink&utm_campaign=birdwatch) [https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch?utm\\_source=bbcwebsite&utm\\_medium=online&utm\\_content=bgbwlink&utm\\_campaign=birdwatch](https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch?utm_source=bbcwebsite&utm_medium=online&utm_content=bgbwlink&utm_campaign=birdwatch)

RSPB [nestbox management](http://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-birds/nestboxes/nestboxes-for-small-birds/cleaning-nestboxes/) [www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-birds/nestboxes/nestboxes-for-small-birds/cleaning-nestboxes/](http://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-birds/nestboxes/nestboxes-for-small-birds/cleaning-nestboxes/)

Butterfly Conservation [Garden Butterfly Survey](https://gardenbutterflysurvey.org/) <https://gardenbutterflysurvey.org/>

Butterfly Conservation [National Moth Recording Scheme](https://butterfly-conservation.org/our-work/recording-and-monitoring/national-moth-recording-scheme) <https://butterfly-conservation.org/our-work/recording-and-monitoring/national-moth-recording-scheme>

People's Trust for Endangered Species [Stag Beetle Count](https://stagbeetles.ptes.org/stag-beetle-count/) <https://stagbeetles.ptes.org/stag-beetle-count/>

Freshwater Habitats Trust [garden pond](https://freshwaterhabitats.org.uk/pond-clinic/create-pond/make-garden-pond/) advice <https://freshwaterhabitats.org.uk/pond-clinic/create-pond/make-garden-pond/>