

How to: Improve an allotment or vegetable patch for wildlife



Photo: Penny Mayes Allotments at Berengrave Wikimedia Commons



Photo: Nikki Mahadevan Vegetable patch Wikimedia Commons

Allotments can be superb resources for wildlife. Many animals like hedgehogs need large territories in which to forage and can visit many plots on an allotment site. The communal and sociable nature of “allotmenting” lends itself to a site-wide initiative to support wildlife.

The sense of community and sharing that grows up between plot holders makes having an allotment a source of joy and well-being at all times. Knowing that one’s allotment is also supporting wildlife is a bonus. Most of what we have written here about allotments applies just as well to managing areas of your garden as a veg or fruit patch.

Target species:

Birds, pollinators and other insects, amphibia and mice – in fact the whole range of wildlife typical of gardens. A typical allotment site has all sorts of habitats, including some very unmanaged plots alongside the tidy ones! For example:

- Soft fruit bushes and fruit trees provide a great resource for pollinators
- Ripe and fallen fruits provide food for birds and other wildlife.
- Vegetable beds cleared annually are great for specialist “arable weeds” for pollinators
- Compost heaps and piles of dead stems provide an excellent home for amphibians and slow worms.
- Old wooden structures provide plenty of holes and cracks for mason bees and solitary wasps.
- Undisturbed piles of bare earth and bare earth in paths provide habitats for mining bees.
- Sheltered areas beneath sheds and compost heaps allow hedgehogs to hibernate.

How to do it

The main purpose of allotments is to grow vegetables or fruit and we assume that you will continue to do so on your plot. Allotment sites vary in character, not just in soils and weather, but in the rules and regulations that each site is governed by. Every allotment site has its own rules about what you are allowed to do. Some sites have restrictions on fruit trees, ponds, or lawns, or state they can only

be used to grow food and that all weeds must be removed. Other sites have few such restrictions. Take a careful look at the rules of your site, check what is possible, and work within these limits. Start by planning what you would ideally want to achieve – see How to [Plan](#) a wildlife-friendly garden, remembering all wildlife needs food, water, breeding sites and shelter.

Productive gardening

Talk to the other allotment owners and find out what fruit and veg grow well, and any recurrent problems, it is best to start off with reliable crops. Remember that hose pipes are generally not allowed, and watering must be done using cans carried from the standpipe or trough. This is hard work, so train yourself to water the plant base only, not the soil all around.

- Don't use insecticides which kill all insects and are hardly ever needed anyway. Caterpillars of white butterflies that eat brassicas (cabbage, kale, etc) can be deterred by covering your plants with fine nets, which will also protect them from the depredations of wood pigeons, one type of wildlife that is very unwelcome on allotments.
- Blackfly infestations on the upper foliage of broad beans can be dealt with by cutting out the affected top part of the stem; this blackfly generally don't damage the lower part of the stems where flowers and pods are found.
- Borders of annual flowers among your vegetables will attract hoverflies whose larvae eat aphids. Simple seed mixes of hardy annuals or cornfield annuals can be broadcast in early summer and require very little care apart from watering in drought.
- Avoid slug pellets. Instead encourage the many predators that eat these molluscs. These include beetles, frogs, toads, hedgehogs, slow worms and song thrushes. The main victim of slugs and snails among food crops is lettuce seedlings and transplants; these can be protected by surrounding them with cut-off sections of transparent plastic bottles. See [How to: Managing pests and diseases in the garden](#)
- Vegetable growing once involved a lot of heavy digging, turning the soil over every year. While this helps bury weeds, it disturbs soil structure and can cause valuable organic matter to oxidise releasing CO₂. There is an increasing trend to no (or minimal) digging, which with an emphasis on composting has been termed "[regenerative horticulture](#)". This approach is likely to help remove atmospheric CO₂ and is well worth trying on your allotment

Making wildlife habitats

Could you create some of the following habitats in your plot?

- A small shallow pond is a good breeding resource for frogs and toads, which will help to control slugs and snails. If there are small children around you can fix a frame over the pond, so long as there is still space underneath for frogs, toads and hedgehogs to get access to the water. See [How to: Create and maintain ponds for wildlife](#)
- A rock pile, an open compost heap (not a sealed plastic bin) or a stack of logs and sticks make excellent invertebrate and amphibian habitats. See [How to: Create Habitat piles](#)
- A piece of corrugated iron laid on the ground will provide a warm (in sunlight) hideaway for beetles, slow worms and even lizards and grass snakes which eat slugs and snails.
- Herbs and herbaceous perennial flowers can be planted in beds or border adjacent to paths or between vegetable areas. They will attract pollinating insects and if planted close together will form 'cover' amongst which wildlife can shelter.
- You can train ivy or honeysuckle up the side of your shed and create a green roof on top.

- Fruit bushes such as raspberries and blackcurrants need to be pruned every autumn. The dead stems can be placed in a loose pile, which may provide suitable shelter or a hibernation site for hedgehogs.



Perennial wild flowers such as knapweed and small scabious can be included as flower patches. As well as attracting pollinators, their seeds will attract seed-eating birds such as goldfinches.

Quick growing hardy annual flowers can be grown from seed in rows beside vegetables. They will attract pollinating insects, especially hoverflies, whose larvae eat aphids.

Photo: Colin Smith Merrow Allotments Wikimedia Commons

Working together

- Try to get a wildlife group going on your allotment site, to swap observations of what lives there, see what other people are doing for wildlife – and of course exchange seeds and cuttings
- Try to build up lists of species with your colleagues, this can help motivate other people
- Many allotment sites have communal areas, these can be enhanced with flower borders that will attract pollinators.

How easy is it to do?

Easy to moderate. It's quite easy if you think it through and plan in advance. Some projects like a green roof or putting in a pond are harder work.

How much will it cost?

See the How-to guides for each activity since cost depends on the features you choose. Buying trees, bushes and perennial plants costs £6 up to £40 each, but seeds are much cheaper. Even better, swap cuttings and off-cuts with other plot holders.

How effective is it for the target species?

Allotment sites can be brilliant for all sorts of wildlife. Encourage other plot holders to look after the wild life too.

Golden rules – what the science tells us

- Many birds and mammals need home territories *much* bigger than most gardens. Allotment sites are much larger than most gardens so suit animals such as hedgehogs very well.
- Insecticides kill all insects, including the many beneficial species, so please don't use them!
- Very small patches of species of plants may not be big enough to be useful for some caterpillars. Red admiral butterflies need big sunlit patches of nettles for example. You may do better to have larger patches of a carefully chosen small number of species.
- Small ponds can be very good for wildlife, both for access to water, and for amphibians and invertebrates living in them. It is easier to keep them topped up with clean rain water than it is for big ponds, and this will help them be clear of blanket weed. Even if they dry up in the summer, most creatures will soon be back when it refills.

- What may be weeds to a gardener are dinner to many wildlife species, so try to leave *some* for them. Indeed, some “weeds” like young dandelion leaves, garlic mustard, fat hen, Good King Henry and orache are edible for people and becoming very fashionable.
- Don’t be over-tidy, small patches or strips of longish grass and wild flowers should be allowed here and there.

What to look for?

Just the same range of species you might find in any wildlife garden in your area. Keep a wary eye on what you find using the garden, and if any plants or features prove disappointing, you could swap them for something else.

Things to be aware of

- Some allotment holders get quite resentful if they think your “weeds” might spread to their tidy plots, so keep your outer borders clean, and explain what you are doing and why!
- Allotments can be less disturbed spaces than small gardens with children, so you may find birds nesting in trees and overgrown areas, so take care not to disturb them.
- Be careful when breaking down a compost heap since you might find frogs, toads, slow worms and hedgehogs living in it.
- Be mindful of nesting solitary bees if you are re-painting your shed.

Further information

Our website

How to: [Plan a wildlife friendly garden](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_plan_garden.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_plan_garden.pdf

How to: Create a [wildlife friendly lawn](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_improve_lawn.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_improve_lawn.pdf

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

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

How to: Create [habitat piles](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_habitat_piles.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_habitat_piles.pdf

How to: [Bring water](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_bring_water.pdf) into your garden www.wlgf.org/ht_bring_water.pdf

How to: Choose pollinator plants for [winter and early spring](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_plants_winter.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_plants_winter.pdf

How to: Choose pollinator plants for [late spring & early summer](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_plants_spring.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_plants_spring.pdf

How to: Choose pollinator plants for [late summer and autumn](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_plants_summer.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_plants_summer.pdf

How to: Manage [pests and diseases](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_pests.pdf) in the garden www.wlgf.org/ht_pests.pdf

Our [web pages](http://www.wlgf.org/trees_shrubs.html) on small trees for wildlife from www.wlgf.org/trees_shrubs.html

Our [web pages](http://www.wlgf.org/plants_intro_new.html) on wild plants for the garden from www.wlgf.org/plants_intro_new.html

[Wildlife on allotments](http://www.wlgf.org/ne20wildlife_on_allotments.pdf) leaflet www.wlgf.org/ne20wildlife_on_allotments.pdf

RHS general [advice on allotments](http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/grow-your-own/allotments) www.rhs.org.uk/advice/grow-your-own/allotments

National [Allotment Society](http://www.nsalg.org.uk/) www.nsalg.org.uk/

[Regenerative horticulture](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regenerative_agriculture) www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regenerative_agriculture

David Montgomery (2018) *Growing a Revolution: Bringing Our Soil Back to Life*. W. W. Norton & Company. 320 pages