

How To: Garden for wildlife with children



Photos: Ruth Staples-Rolfe

Encouraging children to have a strong connection to nature is a vital way to ensure they will value and want to live with wildlife throughout their lives. Often if children have this connection they will begin to understand how humans are connected to the wider world including our influence on climate. Spending time in green space has also been shown to have important mental and physical health benefits; this can be achieved no matter the size of your space.

Target species: In this case *Homo sapiens!*

There are many groups of users in a garden, children, adults and wildlife, and they all have different needs. For children the garden can offer a place to explore, assess risk and challenge themselves. The garden can grow with the child developing to support the age and needs of the child for example you might want to get the children involved in simple sensory planting when they first start out, and creating a pond when they are older.

How to do it

Organising your space for children:

- *Maximise the number of habitats in your green space:* For example, think about increasing interest with small beds of shrubs of differing heights. Add water and think about the whole lifecycle of wildlife by creating foraging, nesting and overwintering habitats. All animals need water and some need this for all or part of their lifecycle
- *Enjoy your garden:* If the design is right, the garden will offer enjoyment to users of all ages. For children this might mean a tree swing and sensory planting. For an adult with a babe in arms it could be a comfy chair with a view of their favourite flowers and shrubs. For wildlife of course, the garden should support every part of their lifecycle
- *Keep it simple:* Some people may have the money to redesign the whole garden at once, but most don't! In this case, simple sensory planting can be a great way to introduce young children to plants and flowers, encouraging children to smell, touch and investigate the plants seen around them. Strong-smelling herbs such as thyme, chives and lavender are also excellent for pollinators, so can be a very effective addition to a garden
- *Food is the way to someone's heart:* Planting fruits and foods in your garden is another great way to encourage children to interact with plants. Strawberries, blackberries, lettuces, radishes and peas are all easy to grow and can be very helpful for teaching children about where food comes from. Try to allow two for yourself and one for the wildlife!
- *Every size of space counts:* You can achieve a really rewarding outdoor space for children even if your outdoor space is relatively small such as a balcony or patio. Strong-smelling herbs are perfect for

window boxes, and many fruits and vegetables can work well with container planting. Vertical gardening is another great way to maximise your space. Have a look at 'How to: [Improve your balcony for wildlife](#)' and 'How to: Create a [vertical garden for wildlife](#)'.

- *Communities can support each other:* Another great step to take if you haven't a much outdoor space at home is to find green spaces in your local community, such as community sites, allotments, parks and woods. Getting involved with a nature a local wildlife watch group, local Wildlife Trust, RSPB or the [Pollinator Promise](#)) can be a great way to get involved in nature near you.
- *Citizen science:* Another great way to get children involved is to take part in country-wide citizen-science initiatives, many of which have excellent resources for children. Examples include the [Big Garden Birdwatch](#) (RSPB), [Big Butterfly Count](#) (Butterfly Conservation) and [Bio Blitz](#) (Natural History Museum). See our page on [surveys](#) for lots more.
- *Safety worries:* Health and safety is of course of huge importance when planning out your space. Have a look at the 'Things to be aware of' section for advice on managing risks in the garden.

Helping children using your wildlife garden

- *Small steps to build confidence:* It is very important to start by building confidence. Introduce children to the garden and natural environment by taking small steps. Always keep the messaging simple for children while guiding them in their learning about nature and gardening
- *Language Development:* Enabling children to be confident with nature-based language will really empower them to investigate and interact with the natural world. For example, you could start with identifying simple habitat features, such as trees, bushes and grass, then move on to another habitat. Language acquisition is at its peak in the early years and can run very nicely alongside learning about nature in a garden environment. The age of around 6-10 is when children may start to be able to confidently identify different structures and habitats within a garden
- *Positive mindset and resilience:* You don't have to know everything! When taking a child outside into nature, it is not at all necessary to know *everything* about nature yourself, the important thing is to support the children to explore and find out more themselves. You can use field guides and identification apps with children to learn more about wildlife; use them as a joint learning experience, to boost your knowledge about the natural world together.



Photo: Andrea Lambert



Photo: Celia Monks

Above: Exploring and discovering

Left: A den built for fairies

- *Emotional and social development:* These benefit from spending time in nature. Many different types of play can happen in different outdoor spaces, such as den-building and risk taking. Taking steps to care for wildlife can also be beneficial to emotional development supporting children's feeling of self-worth and beginning to foster empathy and a sense of responsibility.

- *Healthy lifestyles:* Picking fruit, exercising and playing together develop positive habits that we hope children can adopt as adults.
- *Observation skills and eyesight:* concentrating on tasks such as planting and pond dipping supports eye muscle development and is now used by occupational therapists to help children with muscle weakness. Other ideas might include observing animals and finding animal trails.

How effective is it?

This is very effective with a responsive and enthusiastic adult. You don't need a hugely wildlife rich space to nurture a wildlife connection. Realistically, larger wildlife like birds and mammals doesn't tolerate too much human disturbance, but children find plants, sticks and stones exciting too. Interacting and engaging with the environment at a young age (especially in the 0-5 age group) is hugely important for building an appreciation for nature into the future.

How much does it cost?

Nothing extra really! The cost will be in your time supervising and encouraging – and enjoying discovering the garden wildlife with them.

What to look for? Watch children build confidence when interacting with or being near garden wildlife such as insects and birds. Watch as children embrace nature and the outdoors, finding ways to interact with different habitats through play.

Things to be aware of

Children need to be exposed to risks and learn how to manage risk. Risks in the garden can broadly be categorised into the three sections below. You need to be most careful with toddler age children (1-3 years old), and as they grow you may well want to incorporate more risks in the garden. This will allow the child to grow with the garden, challenging them to interact with risk and uncertainty more as they get older.

Water

- It is always important to manage young children's access to water sources such as ponds, streams or lakes. This is *essential* for children of a toddler age
- You may like to do this by covering any pond with a commercial mesh, or home-made chicken wire and wooden caging structure.
- Alternatively, you may choose to wait to incorporate water features into your garden until children are older. You could start off with bird baths and a [ponds in a pot](#) while young children are likely to visit the garden, [creating a larger pond](#) once you are confident children are old enough to be careful around it.

Poisonous or dangerous plants

- You will naturally want to avoid children finding poisonous plants if there is a chance they will be tempted to eat them. Best not to grow them if young children will be visiting
- Common poisonous garden species include Monkshood *Aconitum*, cuckoo-pint *Arum*, deadly nightshade *Atropa*, castor-oil plant *Ricinus*, autumn crocus *Colchicum*, lily-of-the-valley *Convallaria*, delphinium, foxglove *Digitalis*, spurge *Euphorbia*, bluebell *Hyacinthoides*, morning glory *Ipomea*, laburnum *Laburnum*, cherry and Portugal laurel *Prunus laurocerasus* & *lusitanica*, snowberry *Symphoricarpos*, Yew *Taxus*.
- A number of other plants make people ill, and although they aren't really dangerous, it's important to warn children not to eat anything from the garden without your approval.
- There are a number of non-poisonous but irritating plants. These include both spiky plants like thistles, roses and blackberries which may cause scratches, and others which cause mild skin irritation like stinging nettles. Be aware that parsnip sap is a powerful skin irritant in bright sunlight, parsnips are closely related to the notorious giant hogweed

Insect stings and bites

- Honey bees and common wasps sting to defend themselves and their colony and children should be taught to respect them but not to panic if they approach. Bumblebee females can sting, but they are placid and only sting if caught and handled. Solitary bees have weak stings and are reluctant to use them, so if you have young children, it may be worth encouraging [solitary bees](#) alongside other non-stinging pollinators such as hoverflies, butterflies, moths and beetles.
- As children get older, you can encourage a more diverse range of pollinators in your garden. Older children will be more able to be sensible around stinging insects such as wasps.
- A very small proportion of people develop a severe anaphylactic shock to bee and wasp stings, but usually after a previous sting. If a child develops a red itchy rash spreading beyond the bite area, swelling of the face, lips, tongue or throat and have difficulty breathing treat this as an emergency and get immediate medical help.

Further information

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

How to: Make a [pond in a pot](#) www.wlgf.org/ht_pond_pot.pdf

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

Our education webpages starting [here](#) www.wlgf.org/education_introduction.html

Jan Miller's school [garden vegetable lesson plans](#) www.wlgf.org/jan_miller.html

Our webpage page on [citizen science surveys](#) http://www.wlgf.org/garden_surveys.html

There are many great websites and groups with lots of resources and activities for children in gardens and green spaces:

[Learning through Landscapes](#) www.ltl.org.uk/product-category/page-type/free-resources/

BBC Bitesize [summer nature challenges](#) www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zybwcmn

Wildlife Trusts [Wildlife Watch](#) www.wildlifewatch.org.uk/

RSPB [Big Garden Birdwatch](#) www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch/

RSPB [activities](#) and youth membership www.rspb.org.uk/fun-and-learning/for-kids/

Butterfly Conservation [Big Butterfly Count](#) www.bigbutterflycount.butterfly-conservation.org/

Natural History Museum [Bio Blitz](#) www.nhm.ac.uk/take-part/citizen-science/bioblitz.html

RHS [activities](#) for schools and families www.rhs.org.uk/education-learning/gardening-children-schools

Garden Organic [education pages](#) www.gardenorganic.org.uk/education

Pollinator Promise [website](#) www.pollinatorpromise.co.uk/

Why not find your children's favourite local animals and do some online searching on the best ways to support them and encourage them in your space!