

# How to: Have the greatest conservation impact in your garden



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Photo: Steve Head



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*We don't want just to watch and enjoy our garden wildlife, we hope we can help the conservation of these species in our area – and across Britain and Ireland. While there are challenges for using gardens to conserve wild plants and specialist species, some 'common-or-garden' species really will benefit from your help.*

## How to do it

You can help conservation in several ways:

### *Be sustainable in your gardening*

- Conservation nowadays isn't just about species and habitats, but it brings in climate change and the unsustainable use of resources. Gardening for your own wildlife should include gardening for the planet as a whole – see our guide [How to: Garden to help the planet](#)

### *Help all stages of a species' life cycle*

- This may seem obvious – but to survive and prosper as a species, the plants and animals concerned must reproduce successfully to build up their populations. It is very easy when thinking about garden wildlife to concentrate on the attractive adult insects. Growing pollinator plants will sustain bee populations, but butterflies and moths need the right food plants for their caterpillars – and these caterpillars and other small insects and spiders are vital for birds to feed their nestlings.
- In a cold country like ours, places to safely spend the winter are also essential for almost all garden species

### *Have water in your garden*

- Water is essential for all life, so make it available in your garden. If you have space for a pond, it brings in a whole new habitat with a new set of species. Garden ponds are now very important for declining frog and newt populations as well as a resource for many more insect and vertebrate species. See our guides [How to: Bring water into your garden](#) and [How to: Create and maintain ponds](#) for wildlife

### *Focus on helping typical garden species in big trouble*

- While most garden species are general in their needs, a worrying number are declining alongside the more specialist species in countryside habitats. The list of target species below has some surprising entries, so anything you can do to help song thrushes or house sparrows is a real bonus for conservation.

### *Focus on species special to your area*

- If a species isn't naturally found in your area, it's not going to benefit from your garden. The wall butterfly for example is now mainly a coastal species, while the red squirrel is now absent from most of

England and Wales. If you are living next to a nature reserve, find out what is living there, and try to provide back-up resources such as food and water for these species. In a hot dry summer, splendid insects like the silver-washed fritillary butterfly visit gardens where there is more nectar than in the nature reserve. Your local Wildlife Trust will be able to tell you which garden species are a priority in your area.

*Beware of invasive species*

- While nearly all non-native plant species coexist happily with our natives, a few are spreading fast and causing serious problems. Many of these are garden escapes such as the abundant *Rhododendron ponticum* in the picture which is taking over woodland.



We have a [list of species](#) which must not be allowed to spread into the wild, and it would be sensible to exclude these from your garden. See our [web page](#) on invasive species and plants to avoid

Photo: Franz Xaver via Wikimedia Commons

*Spread the word!*

- Help your friends and neighbours understand what you are doing for your wildlife and encourage them to do the same. There are also great opportunities in managing neighbouring gardens cooperatively – making sure that hedgehogs can move from garden to garden for example or agreeing whose garden would be best for a wildlife pond. If you have children, get them involved too – they will be the next generation of wildlife gardeners

**Target species**

All species in Britain and Ireland are worthy of care and conservation, so all the species completing their life cycle in your garden are benefitting. The garden species listed below are all declining and of enough concern to be in the IUCN -based Red Data list.

**Common name**

**UK Status**

**Birds**

Spotted flycatcher	RSPB Red list
House sparrow	RSPB Red list
Tree sparrow	RSPB Red list
Starling	RSPB Red list
Turtle dove	RSPB Red list
Song thrush	RSPB Red list
Fieldfare	RSPB Red list
Redwing	RSPB Red list
Mistle thrush	RSPB Red list
Dunnock	RSPB Amber list
Bullfinch	RSPB Amber list
House martin	RSPB Amber list

**Reptiles and amphibians**

Common toad	Near threatened
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**Mammals**

Hedgehog	Vulnerable
Red Squirrel	Endangered

**Common name**

**UK Status**

**Insects**

Grey dagger moth	Vulnerable
Garden tiger moth	Vulnerable
The spinach moth	Endangered
Ghost moth	Vulnerable
The lackey moth	Vulnerable
Dot moth	Vulnerable
Dark spinach moth	Endangered
White ermine moth	Vulnerable
Buff ermine moth	Vulnerable
Blood-vein moth	Vulnerable
Cinnabar moth	Vulnerable
Wall butterfly	Near threatened
Stag beetle	Near threatened

**How easy is it to do?**

It should be easy, once you have decided which species or groups of species you particularly want to help. But simply managing your garden with wildlife in mind is a great contribution to the populations of species in your area.

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

There is no additional cost in trying to target species of conservation concern.

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

It will be effective for the creatures which you can support in your garden, but there may be only a few of the list of target species above that you can help.

### **Golden rules – what the science tells us**

- What species you will get in your garden depends on how far north you are, how high you are above sea level and, on your soil and climate conditions. Generally, the further north and the higher you are the fewer species you are likely to have in your garden
- Most gardens are relatively similar habitats, with quite high fertility and a large range of plant species, in relatively benign environmental conditions. While they can support *thousands* of species, few gardens can support really specialist species that need acid bogs, moorland or rivers for example.
- Many of the vertebrate species in your garden will need a much larger area for feeding and breeding, so it's important that your garden can work alongside those of your neighbours.
- Houses change hands frequently, and there is no guarantee that the next owner will look after the wildlife as you have done. This is not too big a problem for animals which are generally mobile and can go elsewhere, but it means that any special plants you are looking after may not survive. Private gardens aren't generally able to contribute greatly to plant conservation, unless you use them as a propagation centre to help your local Wildlife Trust's planting projects

### **What to look for?**

- All signs of animals breeding on your garden. Birds nesting, caterpillars on your plants and tadpoles in your pond are a clear sign that for these species you are getting it right
- Increases in variety and numbers of species. To do this properly you could join one of the many wildlife monitoring schemes – some specific to gardens such as the RSPB [Big Garden Birdwatch](#) or the BTO [Garden BirdWatch](#) scheme. See our long list of monitoring schemes [here](#). Keeping records will help you see change across the seasons and years and help important national data-gathering.

### **Things to be aware of**

Change is likely to be slow, so be patient. Your garden isn't an island, it is probably surrounded by many others, and what your neighbours do will affect your wildlife – all the more reason to make them wildlife gardeners too.

### **Further information**

#### *Our guides*

How to: [Plan a wildlife friendly](#) garden [www.wlhf.org/ht\\_plan\\_garden.pdf](http://www.wlhf.org/ht_plan_garden.pdf)

How to: [Bring water](#) into your garden [www.wlhf.org/ht\\_bring\\_water.pdf](http://www.wlhf.org/ht_bring_water.pdf)

How to: Garden to help the planet (In progress)

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

#### *Our website*

Gardens and [conservation](#) [www.wlhf.org/garden\\_conservation.html](http://www.wlhf.org/garden_conservation.html)

List of prohibited [invasive](#) plants [www.wlhf.org/schedule\\_9\\_species.pdf](http://www.wlhf.org/schedule_9_species.pdf)

Plants [to avoid](#) [www.wlhf.org/plants\\_avoid.html](http://www.wlhf.org/plants_avoid.html)

#### *Monitoring schemes*

Our list of wildlife [monitoring schemes](#) [www.wlhf.org/garden\\_surveys.html](http://www.wlhf.org/garden_surveys.html)

BTO [Garden BirdWatch](http://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/gbw) scheme [www.bto.org/our-science/projects/gbw](http://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/gbw)  
RSPB [Big Garden Birdwatch](http://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch/) [www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch/](http://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch/)