

How to: Improve a patio garden for wildlife



Photo: Nemracc via Wikimedia Commons



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Patios are intensely personal spaces, sometimes the only outside area you have, and the crucial link between your life indoors and out. The challenge is to create wildlife-friendly habitat on an artificial “rock” surface. ‘Container gardening’, using planters and pots allows great flexibility and is a brilliantly effective way to introduce greenery into a patioed or concreted space. It can transform your patio into a ‘green stepping stone’, providing food and shelter for pollinating insects and birds, bringing a greater abundance of wildlife to your neighbourhood.

Target species: Flowering trees or plants on your patio will attract all pollinator groups. Birds will enjoy fruiting bushes or small trees in season, and appreciate water, shelter provided by climbing plants and feeders.

How to do it

- Start off by mapping out your space. Think about other uses your patio will have (e.g seating when entertaining) when you plan how much space to leave for plants.
- The best way to bring greenery into a patio garden is in a variety of pots and planters. The plants you can grow will depend on the size of planters you can fit in the area and the amount of sun your patio gets.
- Generally, the bigger the pot the more moisture it can hold, and the easier it will be to keep plants healthy
- A variety of fruit trees, such as apple and cherry, are small enough to be grown in pots and are brilliant for pollinators when in flower and for thieving birds when in fruit. Do bear in mind that these may need to be re-potted into fresh compost roughly every five years
- You can grow climbers such as ivy or clematis in large pots, and train them to grow up the walls providing vertical cover
- A miniature version of an annual wildflower bed can be created in a medium-to-large sized planter or old sink. Read more in ‘How to: create a bed of annual flowers for wildlife’, but there are some important extra steps to ensure that your wildflowers will be successful in a pot:
 - Ensure that your container has very good drainage; add some rocks or broken pieces of pot to the base and ensure there are large holes on the bottom to let water out.
 - Place it in a sunny spot, and make sure to water at least once a week.

- Herbs are excellent for a patio wildlife garden. Thyme, oregano, rosemary, chives and mint are all very attractive to pollinators and can grow well in small pots, as well as providing a delicious addition to your cooking!
- There are many medium-sized perennial plants that are known for growing well in pots and being low-maintenance year-round; examples of these that are brilliant for wildlife are species like box, cosmos, lavender and heathers
- In many areas it is easier to grow acid-loving plants in patio pots with ericaceous compost than in garden soil. Examples include heather, lily-of-the-valley bush (*Pieris*) camellias and azaleas and they can attract pollinators.
- Try to use plants flowering through the seasons. Plants in pots can be easily moved so that whatever looks best at any time can be displayed prominently, then relegated to a back space afterwards.
- Adding a water source, be this a pond in a pot or a simple birdbath, is an excellent way to encourage wildlife. Check out 'How to bring water into your garden' for ideas that can work in patio gardens.
- Patios are generally too disturbed to encourage birds to use nest boxes, but hanging feeders or bird tables can be popular, and you can often watch birds using them through closed patio doors.



This patio is a multi-function area. Note the plants in pots and raised beds surrounding it, and somewhat eccentric features like stalactites and the gannet on a bed post.

The paving is designed for easy drainage, and grass and weeds are tolerated between the blocks.

Photo: Steve Head

How easy is it to do?

Very easy/easy, mostly consisting of planting up planters and structures to hold them. You can build your assemblage of planters and structures over time as you learn what works. Growing from seed can be tricky but very rewarding.

How much will it cost?

Planters and pots vary in price depending on the materials and size. Generally, the most useful planters will be larger; these will range from around £15 to £45 in most garden centres, although can cost significantly more. You can re-use household containers, even wooden boxes with waterproof lining to the sides (but perforated in the bottom for drainage). Large plastic flower pots are generally freely available from neighbours or garden clubs. Smaller pots usually cost between £2 to £10. Plants average £7-£15 each commercially, but friends and neighbours can often provide cuttings and offshoots. Wildflower seeds can be very inexpensive, usually under £3 for a mixed packet.

How effective is it for the target species?

Effective. By planting a range of flowering plant species in your patio garden, you will be able to support a range of pollinators. Further steps like adding in a water source will also encourage birds and insects into your garden.

Golden rules – what the science tells us

- ‘Green stepping-stones’ are especially important in urban and suburban areas. Habitats for pollinators and other wildlife have become fragmented as cities expanded. By providing pollinator habitats with flowers, water and shelter, you will be transforming your patio into a pollinator habitat, and help link other patches of habitat across the neighbourhood
- Being close to the house and its protective heat and shelter means relatively tender plant species are more likely to survive the winter on patios than in the main garden
- While under-watering can kill plants in summer, over-watering so roots are in soggy soil, can be fatal in winter.

What to look for?

Look out for insects visiting any flowering plants you have provided. Many different bird species will also visit your garden to feeders or to feast on berries of any plants like ivy in the autumn and winter.

Things to be aware of

- It is important to consider how much sunlight your patio gets, and ensure you are choosing appropriate plants. Shade-tolerant species such as ivy, bugle, grape hyacinth and angelica all attract a diverse range of pollinators.
- Gaps between paving and patio slabs attract a lot of weeds, as nutrients can gather here. We would encourage you to embrace weeds such as dandelions for their nectar and pollen resources. Algae growing on a shaded damp patio can become dangerously slippery but can be removed by scrubbing with hot water and a vinegar solution.
- Plants in pots will require more frequent watering than those in the ground, so rather than buying an expensive automatic system, ask a neighbour or friend to water your patio when you go away for a period.

Further information

How to: Create a [vertical garden](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_green_wall.pdf) for wildlife www.wlgf.org/ht_green_wall.pdf

How to: Improve a [small garden](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_small_garden.pdf) for wildlife www.wlgf.org/ht_small_garden.pdf

How to: Improve your [garden for birds](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_birds.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_birds.pdf

How to: Grow plants in containers www.wlgf.org/ht_containers.pdf

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

RHS advice on [patio plants](http://www.rhs.org.uk/garden-inspiration/wildlife/top-10-patio-plants-for-bees) for pollinators: www.rhs.org.uk/garden-inspiration/wildlife/top-10-patio-plants-for-bees

Try planting a small tree (eg bay, holly, box or yew) in a large tub, the edges can be filled with nectar bearing flowers or grasses to add interest and food for insects. Fruit trees on a dwarfing rootstock, or bushes such as apples, blackcurrants and raspberries are ideal for this as they will provide both you and the wildlife with a supply of food. Even sweet peas and runner beans do well in a container if kept well watered. Many other varieties of plant are suitable, especially the woodier herbs, for example lavender, catmint, verbena, thyme, sage, jasmine, heather, honeysuckle and evening primrose. Containers also allow you to grow plants unsuited to your local soil (eg dwarf azaleas, rhododendrons, camellias and heather if your soil is chalky), and you can grow tender perennials or biennials if you bring the container under cover in the winter. Containers can dry out quickly, so you will need to water regularly particularly in summer, evenings are the best time to water. Mulch in your plants in winter as this will help insulate against frost and prevent them drying out in summer.