

How to: Improve a small garden for wildlife



Science has shown us that small gardens can be as species-rich per unit area as big gardens, but you have to be selective in what features you can squeeze in.



Photo: Sean Paton



Photo: Tina Bone



Photo: Mary Morgan

Target species:

The whole range of wildlife typical of the garden habitats you can create, birds, pollinators, other insects, amphibia and mice.

How to do it

- Start by planning what you want to achieve – see our How to leaflet on planning a garden, remembering all wildlife needs food, water, breeding site and shelter.
- With limited space, everything must “pay its rent” in the garden, so make sure all the plants and habitats are as useful as possible, for you as well as the wildlife. Herbs like rosemary, mint and chives help everyone, and take up little space.
- Overall, a big lawn in a small garden isn’t the best bet for wildlife unless you make it wildlife friendly. If you don’t need a lawn for children to play, consider replacing some of it with beds and shrubs.
- You may not have space to put in all the plants and features you would like. Be selective and avoid tiny little areas of habitat that may not be big enough to be useful.
- Remember that you can think vertically as well as horizontally. Small gardens have proportionally more boundaries than large ones, so make full use of these with climbers like clematis, ivy and honeysuckle. Bees love runner beans, and grown up a pyramid of canes, they take up little space.

- Hedges – especially with several species mixed in, are excellent for wildlife, so if you can you could replace fences with hedges. Underneath a hedge is a great place for a habitat piles of logs, sticks and leaves.
- Be careful in your choice of trees. Plant an oak and in 20 years there won't be anything else. See our [list](#) of good small trees and don't have too many – choose species with flowers and fruits useful for wildlife (and you)
- Put up hanging baskets and window boxes with pollinator flowers like nasturtiums and fuchsia.
- Don't waste patio space, so have pollinator plants like lavender, and small fruit trees and bushes in tubs. You can move these round as they come into flower or fruit to make an attractive sitting area.
- Find space for a small pond if you possibly can and set up a bird bath.
- Have as much green cover as you can, with beds full of plants covered in lots of flowers, including some for all seasons.
- Include some shrubs and evergreens that can provide dense cover for creatures to hide and nest.
- Even small gardens have plenty of fence or wall space to put up some nest boxes for solitary bees http://www.wlgf.org/bee_hotel
- You can put in bird feeding stations and bird boxes, but make sure they are properly sited.
- If you have a shed in the garden, why not give it a green roof?

How easy is it to do?

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 hard work. But it's certainly easier to manage a small garden than a big one.

How much will it cost?

Depends on the features you choose. Perennial plants cost £6-£10 each, but seeds are much cheaper. Even better, swap cuttings and off-cuts with your friends. Ponds, feeders and nest boxes are not very expensive, but you can usually make your own.

How effective is it for the target species?

Small gardens can be brilliant for all sorts of wildlife.

Golden rules – what the science tells us

- Many birds and mammals need home territories *much* bigger than most gardens. If your garden is small make sure you leave gaps in the fences big enough to let hedgehogs get in and out – and encourage your neighbours to do the same.

- 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.

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

It may be harder to avoid disturbance by dogs, cats and people in small gardens – and impacts from neighbours, so you may not attract nesting birds, but you can still provide lots of food and caterpillars to feed their nestlings.

Further information

How to: [Plan](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_plan_garden.pdf) a wildlife friendly garden 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: Grow plants in containers www.wlgf.org/ht_containers.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 [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: Create and maintain [ponds for wildlife](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_pond_pot.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_pond_pot.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: Improve a [patio](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_patio.pdf) for wildlife www.wlgf.org/ht_patio.pdf

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