

Plants to encourage birds and wildlife in your garden

Plants play a huge role in encouraging wildlife in your garden, they provide food and habitats for many birds bugs and other species.

Shrubs

Shrubs provide all year round colour, structure and interest in the garden and can support a rich and varied wildlife.

They are great for making an impact on a bare looking garden, providing an interesting and exciting feature and are good at filling gaps, covering a wall or creating an attractive boundary. Shrubs add year-round colour, pattern, shape and fragrance to a garden.

Shrubs provide shelter from wind and create small micro-climates. They can be used to add features of interest to different areas of the garden either singly or collectively in a border or as a linear hedge.

Shrub beds where plants form a dense, tight canopy make excellent wildlife havens, particularly where thorny species such as hawthorn, wild rose and bramble grow. This provides a safe haven for wildlife and protects them from predators.

With appropriately timed management, a shrub bed or hedge provides an ever-changing display of flowers, catkins, autumn leaves, winter berries and stems.



Hawthorn, in blossom (above left) and berries (above right)

Wild rose

Climbing plants

Climbers are a shrub with the ability to grow up and over structures such as walls, fences, trees or through a hedge. They are a good way of attracting wildlife where space is limited.

The two best wildlife-friendly climbers are ivy and honeysuckle. Even if you only have a balcony or patio, a pot grown climber can be grown up a trellis or over a balcony railing.

Our native ivy (*Hedera helix*) is the perfect wildlife plant. Contrary to what most people believe, ivy won't damage a wall but is likely to offer it protection and a degree of insulation. However if you let it climb into gutters or around pipes, it can dislodge them and damage paintwork. There is a host of different cultivars of varying shades and shapes.

Honeysuckle, unlike ivy, isn't self supporting so you will need to provide a trellis or wires. It's great for covering arches and pergolas, or scrambling over a fence or shed. The bark on mature honeysuckle provides good nest-building material and the plant attracts a wide range of insects.

One of our most popular garden climbers is clematis. Our native variety, old man's beard (*Clematis vitalba*) is found on chalky soils in the south and in the Midlands is unlikely to be found in most nurseries. Many cultivated varieties are available and they will attract insects and serve as shelter for birds.



Hedera helix



Honeysuckle



Clematis vitalba

Hedges

A hedge is a permanent feature so choose the location, eventual height and species composition carefully.

The best hedges contain several species that come into leaf, flower and fruit at different times, enhancing their wildlife value. A mixed hedgerow of native species is particularly appropriate for rural gardens where it will blend in with the surrounding countryside.

You can also plant a native hedge in urban areas, especially at the end of a garden to form a thorny intruder-proof barrier. Unless you keep its growth in check, it could develop into a tall impenetrable thicket though.

The eventual height of the hedge is important in the choice of plants. For example, rosemary and lavender are only suited to hedges up to 60cm (2ft) high, but hawthorn and beech can be maintained at 1-3m (3-10ft), or grown taller.

Leyland cypress has been planted widely over the last 20-30 years as instant hedging. Since it grows 1m (3ft) per year and can reach 45m (150ft), management problems outweigh advantages. A medium-sized specimen will drain the moisture and nutrients from a 3 metre (10ft) radius. Its wildlife value is minimal, other than as shelter, and most other plants are more beneficial.

Small trees, such as rowan and crab apple, are useful in a hedge. You can include them in a new hedge, or encourage a hawthorn or blackthorn to develop into a small tree in an established hedge.



Rowan

Crab apple in blossom (above left) and in fruit (above right)

Flowering plants

Herbaceous, biennial and annual plants and bulbs look great and provide nectar, seeds and cover for wildlife. They are also excellent at filling gaps between trees and shrubs.

The mixed border has long been the mainstay of the UK garden and can be a quick and easy way to bring year round colour and wildlife to your garden. With careful planning, you can have something in flower for most months of the year.

Insects are drawn to many varieties of flower traditionally used in gardens. Herbaceous perennials, biennials and annuals quickly become established to provide cover and food in newly-created gardens. They give cover and a source of insects and seed for birds.

When selecting flowering plants, try to choose single petalled varieties. Many modern hybrids with multiple layers of petals or blooms look pretty, but are often of lower nectar and pollen value, and less beneficial to insects.

Arable flowers, such as corn cockle, corn marigold, poppy and cornflower, provide an attractive splash of colour throughout the summer and are very easy to grow. They are pleasing to the eye, and attract many beneficial insects that come to nectar and feed on the pollen. Their seeds provide a source of food for birds and can be enhanced by the addition of a small amount of spring wheat or barley.

You can grow arable flowers in plant trays. A shallow, tray filled with soil can be seeded with a suitable mix of flowers and will look very attractive on a balcony, terrace or other restricted space.



Corn Cockle and Corn Marigold



Poppies



Cornflower

A few plants to help encourage wildlife in you garden



Viburnum opulus, Guelder rose - good autumn colour and white summer flowers, which turn into red berries in autumn, providing a good food source for birds.
(Early summer)



Echinops ritro, Globe thistle - this thistle is a great architectural perennial, with its spherical blue flower-heads drying into striking seed-heads. The flowers attract bees and butterflies, and birds eat the seeds.
(Summer)



Buddleja davidii, Butterfly bush - good source of nectar for butterflies.
(Summer)



Lonicera periclymenum, Honeysuckle - provides nectar for butterflies and moths, which it attracts with its nocturnal scent. Birds also eat the seeds.
(summer)



Calendula officinalis, Marigold - nectar rich and also good for companion planting.
(summer)



Primula vulgaris, Primrose - the spring flowers provide an early source of nectar in spring, while the leaves are food for butterfly larvae and finches eat the seeds.
(Spring)



Hedera helix, Ivy - provides shelter for birds, nectar in winter and berries in spring.
(all year)