

Conservation

How to create an insect-friendly garden

By Stuart Munro

Many people know the value of garden plants to one group of insects – butterflies, and there are several very good books on gardening for these beautiful and graceful insects. Other insects do not fare so well and are often labelled creepy-crawlies and ‘pests’ but in fact can be quite amazing in their own way; acting as pollinators of garden plants and even as a natural form of pest control. Here are a few ideas on how you can encourage more of these fascinating creatures into your garden; giving you hours of pleasure watching them go about their “buzziness”.

Dead Wood

This provides a habitat for many insects (and may also be used as a hibernation site by small mammals such as Hedgehogs). Several beetles lay eggs and have larvae which live inside dead wood, sometimes for many years. Solitary wasps & bees may also nest in dead wood. To encourage the largest variety of insect life some dead wood should be located in a shaded part of the garden and stacked tightly to avoid being dried out by the wind & sun, but others can be placed in sunny spots.



Hedges



Much better than fences, hedges can provide food & shelter for a wide variety of insects (and birds too). Rather than one long hedge all of the same type, a hedge of a variety of native shrubs will allow for a greater variety of different types of insect; providing flowers for pollen and nectar-feeding insects, leaves & shoots for plant-feeding insects as well as berries for birds. Blackthorn, hawthorn & privet species are ideal, though all require plenty space to grow to flowering size and must not be clipped too heavily to allow flowering. Bramble, though not normally planted as a hedge but will grow around hedgerows and walls naturally, is an excellent source of nectar in July & August if space can be allowed for it. Ivy will also encourage butterflies, moths & other insects into your garden.

Plants



The most well known plant to attract butterflies is Buddleia, and most brightly coloured cultivated plants favoured by most gardeners will attract various butterflies, bees and other pollinating insects. A far greater range of insects can be attracted, however, by planting some of our native wild flowers (most garden centres stock wild flower seeds – please do not pick wild flowers as this may hurt the natural environment). Many of these wild flowers are considered “weeds” by gardeners and include buttercups, dandelions, clovers, thistles, heather and scabious. A small patch of nettles is another favourite; no less than four different species of butterfly rely on this plant for egg-laying (Small Tortoiseshell, Peacock, Red Admiral & Coma).

Ponds

Most people will think that ponds are only for frogs/toads & fish but not so; a small pond can attract water beetles, caddis-flies and even brightly coloured and active dragonflies and damselflies.



A wildlife pond is different from an ornamental fish pond however; a sloping side and shallow shelf to simulate a marshy area and allow those animals which crawl out of the water when they are turning into adults.

Stones & Rocks



Flat stones or bricks lying on the soil surface can provide sites for hibernation or refuge for nocturnal and moisture-loving insects. One such group which particularly require such a place are the ground beetles which are very useful as natural pest controllers as they hunt and feed on other small insects. Ants will also build their nests under flat stones.

And finally... It is not necessary to try ALL of these projects (some gardens will not be large enough to allow this) but even if you just manage to let a small area of “weeds” grow in one corner or place a few stones or bits of deadwood where there is a space then you will have made your garden much more attractive to a whole host of insects.