

Stillingfleet

Vanessa Cook of Stillingfleet Gardens and Nurseries encourages us to make all our gardens more hospitable to wild visitors – from birds and bees to hedgehogs

This month is one of the sunniest and the time when we all hope that our gardens will be full of butterflies and bumblebees. If you feel your garden has not as many as you would like, now is the time to plan for a more wildlife-friendly environment.

There are basic ingredients that help to encourage more wildlife. At Stillingfleet the garden and meadow has been planted to give diverse habitats for invertebrates, mammals and birds. Many plants are grown for their pollen or nectar output, and even the smallest space can be improved with a little thought. It is good to remember that ladybirds, lacewings, tits and warblers keep greenfly and black fly under control, saving time spraying and helping to protect the environment.

Our meadow is ancient grassland and after 15 years of care is now full of wildflowers, including three varieties of orchid. The grass is left long and flowers are allowed to seed before we cut it in early September. The grass is then removed as we do not want the soil to be enriched with the decaying grass (the poorer the soil the thinner the grass grows, allowing more flowers to establish). Part of the grass is then cut very short with the lawn mower so the spring bulbs are visible. Other parts are left slightly longer to give cover to insects and invertebrates during the winter. The meadow has several plants that are especially good for butterflies and moths – early in the year we have primroses, cowslips and oxlip. I often see bee flies at that time of the year. It's a fascinating insect as it pollinates our primroses, but is also a parasite, laying its eggs in bumble bee nests and then devouring the larva.

We also have pignut, an umbellifera rather like low-growing cow parsley. This is the food plant of a small, black day-flying moth called a Chimney Sweeper and in the summer we have clouds of them flying in the meadow. Our meadow is a type of lowland hay meadow and one of the most important plants is knapweed, host

to several varieties of butterfly and insect, flowering in July and August. Other plants useful for butterflies are scabious, cranesbill and meadowsweet, and we have a cluster of teasel plants grown especially for the birds. The seed heads are left uncut for the winter, and we often see goldfinches busy retrieving the seed.

The meadow is edged with an untidy hawthorn hedge. There is a mix of blackthorn, covered with white flowers in April, hawthorn, flowering a month later, honeysuckle, bramble, wild roses scrambling through and the odd elder. It provides excellent cover for birds, abundant pollen and nectar, and hips and berries into the winter. The odd tree has been allowed to develop and ivy grows through some of the lower shrubby growth. Birds need nest sites and we also have close-cut holly, beech and hornbeam, which give ideal cover. We also have a *Rosa rugosa* hedge, I would suggest that if you have room

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for just one plant it will give you hours of pleasure, with single white, pink or magenta flowers followed by large orange hips and in the autumn the foliage goes golden yellow, when the whole hedge is attacked by finches who also love the hips.

Near the meadow we have a pond which is again designed to encourage wildlife. It is clay-lined with wide ‘shelves’ for plants such as *Iris pseudocorus* (good for dragonflies) and marsh marigolds. The narrow end of the pond is filled with cobbles which we collected when the pond was dug. These allow animals ease of access and give cover for invertebrates. Water lilies are planted in the deep water but at least two thirds of the water is clear of plants. Dragonflies, frogs, toads, newts, water boatmen and ramshorn snails are all seen in

the pond. We did have a water vole one summer and were delighted but it did eat a lot of plants and I wasn't too unhappy when it moved to the pond in the neighbouring field.

When we moved here nearly 40 years ago there were no trees and as the west wind seemed to blow directly from the Pennines, we planted a shelter belt of mainly native trees; limes, beech, maples, chestnut and the odd scots pine and larch. These are home to woodpeckers and are used as perches by many birds including owls. We have put up many bird boxes and one was used by tree bumblebees last year. It is important not to be too tidy a gardener if you want to encourage more diverse forms of wildlife to your garden – we have piles of dead logs and have left a tree we cut down in the shelter belt to rot in situ. The logs provide places for animals to hibernate and fungi to grow. We also have insect houses which we have made from logs drilled with holes, drainage pipes stuffed with straw or the dried stems of plants such as hedge parsley. Cones collected from the pines give excellent winter hiding places for insects. Hedgehogs have piles of twigs and leaves left under the trees in which they can hibernate, which is important as several hedgehogs have been released here from hedgehog sanctuaries, but we have found them hibernating in the herbaceous borders. A good reason not to cut all the plants down until March.

Now we get to the pretty part of the garden and the flowers to encourage butterflies and bumblebees. Firstly single rather than double flowers are better for pollen and nectar. Monarda, nepeta, lavender and sedums are all excellent and being perennial make larger clumps each year. Annuals to grow include nasturtiums, cosmos and cornflowers, all easy to grow and ideal for children (or in my case grandchildren) to grow.

Nothing is more wonderful than watching butterflies on your plants or listening to the blackbird singing.

Stillingfleet Lodge Gardens, York
www.stillingfleetlodgenurseries.co.uk