



**Urquhart & Hunt’s A Rewilding Britain Landscape at Chelsea Flower Show reveals the key role that beavers play as ecosystem engineers in landscape restoration**



A Rewilding Britain Landscape, site MA327 – credit photograph: Tammy Marlar

Beavers are natural rewilders. Their dams filter water and variegate flow, cleaning streams and allowing slow pooling. These pools, and the nature-rich wetlands that develop alongside them, support many other species – amphibian, vertebrate and invertebrate— allowing ecosystems to repair and recover. The ponds, regenerating trees and marsh grasses all act as a vital carbon sink, whilst also alleviating flooding by holding back storm water flows.

In Britain we’ve been slow to welcome back these habitat-creating, flood-preventing animals, after 4-600 years of extinction; but reintroductions are on the increase, bolstered by a government announcement last week about the rewilding of London that will include releasing beavers into the marshes around the periphery of the capital.

Working in collaboration with the charity Rewilding Britain, landscape designers Urquhart & Hunt have chosen to make beaver activity the core of their garden at RHS Chelsea Flower Show this year.

The garden shows a rewilding beaver habitat in the south west of England. A brook flows beneath a west-country crafted dry-stone wall, under a woodland edge of hawthorn, elder, viburnum, hazel and field maple. Beavers have entered the landscape and built a lodge and a dam which has altered the water course and created the first large pool in the garden.

The lodge, built around a white willow (*salix alba*) is the beavers’ family home and within it are several chambers and even a swimming pool for their young kits to learn to swim before they leave the lodge for the first time.

Below the dam, made entirely of beaver-gnawed sticks, there is evidence of the beavers' activities: a beaver feeding station with "chop-sticks" that have had all their bark nibbled off; felled trunks, that are either decaying or regenerating; beaver "chips", left where they have chewed away the wood in the felling process; a muddy canal made by the mammals as they pull logs and materials to and from different dams; and beaver footprints in the muddy banks of the stream.

Beavers are nocturnal, sleeping in their lodge during the day, so sightings are rare, but a hide, equipped with binoculars and wildlife reference books, has been built over the stone wall, with a view to the lodge and dam, for anyone keen to sit and spot the wildlife occurring in this flourishing and bio-diverse nature scape. The hide has been built from reclaimed elm and oak timbers and from corrugated iron taken from an old, dismantled barn.

The fresh, clean water flowing faster from one side of the dam exposes gravel known as 'redds' and provides perfect conditions for fresh water fish to spawn.

You can spot a water-vole lawn further down the quiet stream, with holes in the bank where the voles would be living. They use the canopy cover of young regenerating trees, like the wetland loving Goat willow (*salix caprea*) and mature grasses like the greater tussock sedge, (*carex paniculate*) as protection from predators. Water-voles and otters thrive alongside beaver habitats, with blooming plant colonies and fish stocks providing food and safe places for their homes.

Approximately 3600 native and naturalising plants have been grown for the garden – a challenging feat, many grown from seed or in specialist water plant nurseries and all in peat-free soils. Native wildflowers mingle with grasses in the garden's varied planting zones, while pretty native marginal plants establish along the edges of the pool and streams. The palette reconnects us with our own landscapes and the jewels found in our native plants. The planting style informs their natural growing habits and colonies, subject to moisture levels and furthermore a chance to observe the way native insects use them.

Urquhart & Hunt felt that it was crucial to bring sound into the garden: "One of the staggering experiences of a rewilding area is the sound, so we have collaborated on the creation of a soundscape that features noises long lost, but possible to recover, with ecological restoration and the reintroduction of keystone species," they say. "The aim is to show melodies of a future landscape alive."

They continue: "The inspiration for *A Rewilding Britain Landscape* came from us seeing, at first hand, the incredible abundance and diversity that appear in beaver habitats: the perfect imperfections of nature in balance with habitat emergence and species flourishing. Our journey in the making of this landscape has made us more passionate than ever about bringing the rewilding message to a wider public. Ours really is a message of hope, showing how rapid ecological restoration can be, when given the space and right conditions for the land to evolve."

Post-RHS Chelsea Flower Show, all the plants from *A Rewilding Britain Landscape* will go to award-winning, nature-based health and wellbeing charity, [Lindengate](#). Based in Buckinghamshire, thousands of people of all ages and cultures are welcomed to learn and benefit from nature as a teacher and healer, particularly young people and those working in support services such as the NHS and schools.

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