

WILD PROSPECTS

Our new columnists - the RHS Chelsea Flower Show winners Urquhart & Hunt - discuss welcoming wildlife into gardens

Lulu Urquhart and Adam Hunt of Urquhart & Hunt won Best in Show and Gold at this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show and were named Homes & Gardens' Garden Designer of the Year 2022. In this new series, they share their insights on sustainable garden design.

WE feel that a garden is not a garden without birdsong and butterflies flitting through the borders. There is a sound to this nature-scape that is hard to capture in words. One of Adam's greatest joys are the glow-worms now thriving in the small patch of Somerset countryside that he carefully tends in the form of a modest lawn gone wild to a natural grass meadow. For Lulu, it is the small birds that thrive in the copse near her house that bring joy. She has witnessed fledgling woodpeckers learning to climb a large ash tree at the edge of the dense canopy, as well as nuthatches and tree creepers.

As the winter solstice passes and the days slowly start lengthening, now is a good time to look at how one draws nature closer to the home. This revolves specifically around habitat. Every living creature requires a home, from which to feed, breed, rest and thrive, and we humans are in the habit of denuding the world of healthy habitat far more than increasing it. The animals we want in our gardens; mammals, invertebrates, reptiles, birds and insects, do not view our gardens as separate plots. What they see is a mosaic of different habitats weaving in and out of each other with areas for foraging, shelter and socialising. Sadly, they also see no-go areas which



Echinops 'Veitch's Blue'; *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire' and *Gaura* 'Whirling Butterflies' stand in late autumn



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LULU URQUHART & ADAM HUNT,
landscape and garden designers, Urquhart & Hunt

are difficult or dangerous to cross, for example Astroturf, manicured lawns, roads, fields of monocrops and built-up areas with no vegetation. By knowing what habitat is and enhancing it, we can hopefully create landscapes that creatures are able to live in.

When designing a garden, we start by looking at what habitat already exists, both within the boundaries of the land or garden and beyond into the wider landscape. We then look at what animals we might hope to attract into the garden – be it butterflies, stag beetles, sparrows or hedgehogs – and then from this we start to consider how planting, hard landscaping and management of the garden might affect them – for good or for bad. Habitat does not always look appealing to humans, indeed much of it looks messy to the house-proud eye. But this ‘mess’ is in truth complex, and wildlife adores it.

REWILDING OUTDOOR SPACES FOR THE GOOD OF NATURE

Multi-layered planting The highest concentration of wildlife in a natural ecosystem is often found at the margins between woodland and pasture, or at the water's edge. Planted borders, with a good mix of perennials and shrubs, can provide a similar habitat. Thorny shrubs such as blackthorn, *Prunus spinosa*, or the evergreen *Pyracantha coccinea*, provide safe nesting habitat for robins, blackbirds, thrushes and chiffchaffs, all of which like to nest low and are vulnerable to predators. Leave the shrubs as shaggy and natural as you can and only cut if you have to in the late autumn. Planting seed-rich, late summer perennials such as *Rudbeckia*, *Echinacea*, *Echinops* and *Helianthus* varieties provide autumn food for birds. Let plants stand into the winter for their beautiful structural forms – it is a delight to see goldfinches flitting in and out of them as they search for the seed. Plant pollen-rich varieties such as the *Achillea* and *Cirsium* species for nectar-loving insects and remember to plant something for the caterpillars; *Viola odorata* (for several fritillary butterfly species), nettles, *Sanguisorba* and *Verbascum* species are all valuable forage plants.

Water There are approximately three million ponds in UK gardens, an incredible source of habitat for both insects and amphibians. Best with no fish but still good if the goldfish must stay. They don't even need to be big; a tiny container on a balcony with a miniature waterlily still creates a haven. Remember wherever you are, you are standing over a water catchment to your local river system, whether under or overground, including springs and tributaries.

“THERE CAN BE NO PURPOSE MORE ENSPIRITING THAN TO BEGIN THE AGE OF RESTORATION, REWEAVING THE WONDROUS DIVERSITY OF LIFE THAT STILL SURROUNDS US”

EDWARD WILSON,
American biologist, naturalist and writer



Seedheads of *Sanguisorba officinalis* amongst *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Bronzeschleier'

Compost heaps All compost heaps, no matter how well or poorly managed, create a metropolis of different homes for all manner of important insects and other little-considered microfauna. They also provide an invaluable compost for the soil, a vital habitat and link in the natural cycle that keeps nutrition in the garden.

Leaf litter Although it's tempting to rake or blow the leaves off the flowerbeds in the autumn, if left they provide home and food for many useful creatures, including worms and predatory beetles.

Standing deadwood and decay Decaying wood enriches the nutrient cycles of the water and soil systems. Leaving deadwood on a tree, on the ground or in water, where safe to do so, creates safe havens and feeding grounds for fungi, lichen, insects, bats, small birds, woodpeckers and more.

Walls Built with traditional materials such as dry-stones set into earth or using a lime mortar, walls provide vital homes for numerous species of solitary bees and bumblebees. Dry-stone walls give winter homes to amphibians and reptiles.

If you are enjoying the wildlife in your garden or local park, keep a record of what you see – birds, butterflies, bees and frogs – it's fascinating to see what does well each season and to compare notes with your community. 📧