

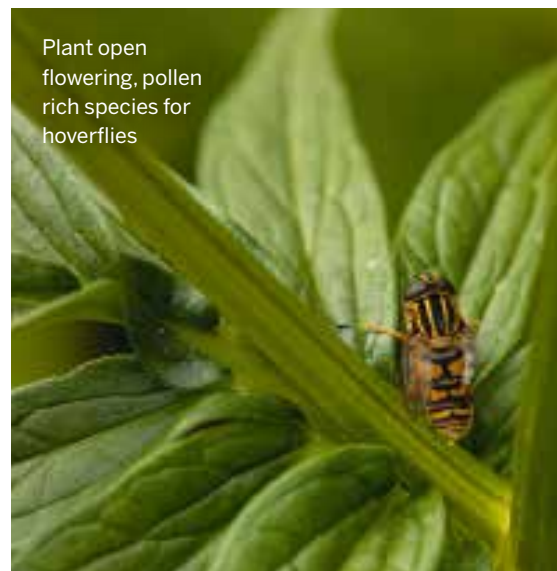
WILD PROSPECTS

Urquhart & Hunt discuss the importance of insects and why we should be inviting them into our gardens

Lulu Urquhart and Adam Hunt of Urquhart & Hunt won Best in Show and Gold at last year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show and were named Homes & Gardens' Garden Designer of the Year 2022. This month, the duo share their insights into the benefits of an insect-rich outdoor space.

WE have all heard it in the news; the number and indeed weight of insects outstrips us humans so much that we are almost a footnote when compared to the prevalence of insects on Earth. They are also extremely important to the wellbeing of our beautiful planet, responsible for such a large range of vital services that it's hard to name them all.

Nearly all flowering plants have evolved on the basis of the ability of insects to pollinate and help them reproduce. This unique relationship has evolved over millions of years as plants have cleverly adapted to entice insects with an increasingly complex and enticing offer of flowers laden with sugary nectar and protein-rich pollen. The result of this relationship is that now without insects we and other mammals would have very little to eat and the world would be a much less beautiful place. Additionally, insects are essential for helping with the decomposition of dead plant and animal life, alongside other arthropods,



Plant open flowering, pollen rich species for hoverflies



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bacteria and fungi, and they are incredible terraformers, improving soil structure wherever they go.

Let's be honest, if humans disappeared tomorrow, all other animal and plant species would carry on as normal and they would probably even breathe a great sigh of relief. Conversely, if insects disappeared, then many of our beautiful planet's essential biological functions would grind to a halt. Yet in our gardens we have traditionally been taught to fear our insect friends; sawflies eat our fruit, aphids suck the life out of our roses and vine weevils eat almost anything they can, the list goes on and on. This fear is obvious with a visit to any garden centre where the shelves of pesticides stretch far into the distance.

The trouble is that most sprays are indiscriminate in their effects; they kill the good insects as well as the bad, and many insects are good in gardening terms. Nature has evolved such that nearly all our pest insects have predators who, given a chance, can deal with them in a natural way that is in balance. A perfect example of this is a tiny parasitic wasp that preys on aphids, so insignificant in our thinking that they do

not even have a common name, their Latin name being *Aphidius colemani*. These little wasps, given half a chance, can decimate an aphid infestation and do so after the first flush of aphids in the spring, but many of us, as soon as we notice the aphids appearing, reach for the spray and so also kill the tiny black wasps who are doing their thing, or if we spray early destroy their food source before they even have a chance to get to work. If we have the courage to wait a while then normally these little wasps will arrive and do the work for us, but only in a pesticide free environment.

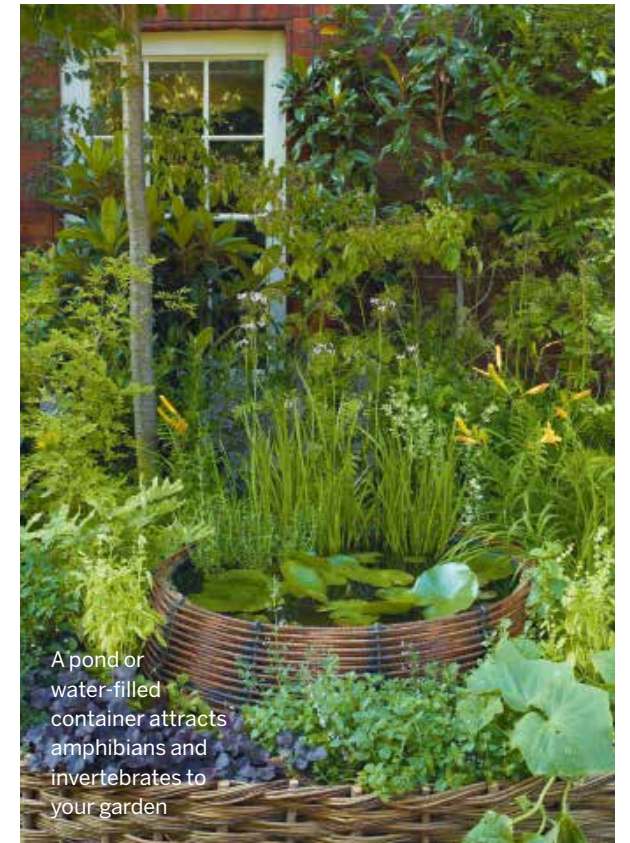
Another example is vine weevils, for these incredibly destructive little fellows their foe is a tiny worm called a nematode. These parasitic nematodes do not naturally occur in the numbers that we need when we have a weevil problem. Fortunately, they can be bought as a natural pest control either online or from some garden centres and they really do work when used carefully and according to the instructions.

Some vegetable pests such as cabbage white butterfly caterpillars and carrot root fly can easily be prevented using nets and barrier treatments to prevent the adults laying eggs on our precious vegetables. Even common wasps, the bane of September, play their role. I remember a day when I sat watching the wasps from a nest in my garden, that my neighbour had asked me to remove, diligently flying into my vegetable patch and each time leaving with a caterpillar clasped to them to take back to their nest to feed their young. So even wasps aren't all bad.

The main thing is that we would all hope and wish for our gardens to be insect-rich havens, busy with butterflies, moths, bees and hoverflies. Indeed we want gardens where all kinds of animal life can thrive and to do this, insecticides have to be consigned to history and we have to trust nature to do her thing and where this doesn't work intervene with barriers or, for example with the dreaded Lily bug, remove by hand (horrible though it is) and so too with slugs and snails, though nematodes work with them as well.

Key things to do for an insect-rich garden:

- No pesticides or herbicides – ever.
- Have a pond or water-filled container to attract amphibians, damselflies, water boatmen and even dragonflies, the insect predator.



A pond or water-filled container attracts amphibians and invertebrates to your garden

- Install a compost heap, a log pile or even just a few sticks lying around decomposing to provide a refuge for predatory beetles and ladybirds. If you're lucky a hedgehog or some slow worms may even take residence there, too.
- Where possible allow leaves to decompose where they fall and leave perennial plant heads standing into early spring.

Regarding plants we use open flowering, pollen-rich plants such as asters, umbellifers and alliums to attract adult butterflies, night flying moths and hoverflies. But we are also interested in what the caterpillars eat and they tend to be much more picky. So we would plant Viola species as a plant food for many Fritillary butterfly caterpillars, blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) for the Brown Hairstreak, Devil's-bit scabious (*Succisa pratensis*) for the Marsh Fritillary butterfly, Verbascum species for the Mullein moth and Rosebay willowherb (*Chamerion angustifolium*) for the Elephant Hawk-moth.

Beyond this and most importantly, step back and observe and you may find that nature can take care of many of your horticultural worries. Surely a few nibbled leaves is a price worth paying for the sight of butterflies flying around your garden. 🐛