

Habitat Action Plan

Private Gardens



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***“A poor widow in her weeds
Sowed her garden with wild-flower seeds...
And now all summer she sits and sews
Where willow, herb, comfrey, bygloss blows,
Teasel and tansy, meadowsweet,
Campion, toadflax, and rough hawksbit...”***
(Walter de la Mare, 1962)

1. Aims

- To highlight and protect the overall resource for wildlife provided by private gardens in London.
- To improve individual private gardens as habitat for a range of local wildlife.

2. Introduction

For the purposes of this action plan, private gardens are defined as the private open space surrounding residential dwellings where the householders have sole responsibility for management.

Private gardens form an important part of London's landscape. For many people these are the places where they have most frequent contact with nature.

They are probably the most varied areas of green space in the Capital, ranging in size from the tiny 'pocket handkerchief' backyard in the central London boroughs, to the elaborate landscaped parkland of London's mansions. Garden ponds support

amphibians and dragonflies. Dense undergrowth provides good breeding sites for small birds, many of which have suffered significant declines in the countryside. Hedgehogs, bats, butterflies are frequently associated with this habitat. Larger gardens and gardens adjoining areas of semi-natural habitat, may help support grass snakes, badgers and birds such as woodpeckers.

3. Current Status

The rapid growth of suburban London last century resulted in large areas of low-density housing enclosing groups of individual gardens. Together these add up to substantial areas of open land. As undeveloped land has become scarcer in the city, gardens have come under pressure for development.

The former London Ecology Unit carried out an analysis of aerial photographs taken in 1981 and found that private gardens comprise approximately 20% of Greater London, equivalent to 30,000 hectares. The mosaic of gardens across the capital is now widely recognised as providing valuable habitat for a significant number of our common animals.

4. Specific Factors Affecting the Habitat

4.1 Management style

Management style has a profound effect on the wildlife associated with gardens. An intensively managed garden, or one that is largely lawn and hard surfacing, will support far fewer species than a garden which contains a range of habitats such as shrubs, climbers, long grass, a pond and dead wood.

4.2 Planting

The plants used in a garden can also have a major impact on the wildlife supported by it. Some plants lay special claim to improving a garden's value for wildlife. For example, ivy is a seasonally important source of nectar and berries, provides nesting and roosting habitats for birds, and is the caterpillar food plant to the holly blue butterfly. Pyracantha, hawthorn and the female holly provide autumn berries for thrushes.

On the other hand, some plants have comparatively little value for wildlife, for example double-flowered varieties which produce no nectar. Some may even be harmful to wildlife, for example exotic problem species such as parrot's feather, and Spanish bluebell, which hybridises with our native bluebell.

4.3 Pesticide use

Excessive use of pesticides has been cited as one of the potential causes of the decline of certain species, especially birds and hedgehogs. Pesticides may reduce available food, such as snails, which are eaten by song thrushes. They may also have more direct effects; for example insecticides may kill beneficial insects as well as the target species.

Organic gardening is becoming more popular. However, ignorance and the desire for a 'quick fix' solution are still key factors in the choice of pest control methods. There is a need for greater awareness in this area.

4.4 Scale

The size of a garden and the extent to which it is connected with adjacent open land is a major factor influencing the wildlife that will use it. However, all gardens are potentially valuable, and there is no minimum size for a wildlife garden.

4.5 Planning controls

New targets for housing, reflecting social, economic and demographic changes, have fuelled the demand for suburban infill or backland development. This has resulted in a loss of garden habitat. However, a number of boroughs have planning policies in place to discourage this.

Since the 1960s, people have aimed for the ideal of a small house with its own garden. However, in recent years there has been a reduction in the size of gardens provided in new developments.

4.5 Wider factors

Although many individual gardeners now have some awareness of the practice of 'wildlife gardening', 'wild gardening', or 'natural gardening', there is still a considerable variety of interpretation on the detail of these methods. Gardeners are also significant consumers of resources. The horticultural industry often sources unsustainable products such as wild plants, peat, tropical hardwoods and natural stone, collected from threatened habitats around the world. The transport of goods and the use of resources in the manufacture of garden products are issues for gardeners to be aware of in reducing their ecological footprint. Garden centres and growers clearly have a significant role to play in marketing appropriate plants and products.

People sometimes presume that the best way to get wildlife in a garden is to take it from the wild. Plants and animals are still being removed from the countryside, and even nature reserves.

5. Current Action

5.1 Legal status

Private gardens are seldom protected from development purely from a biodiversity perspective, and very few are included in Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation.

However, biodiversity is often a factor included in planning policies to protect garden land.

Conservation Area status and Tree Preservation Orders give some protection to tree cover.

Some animals using gardens are protected to various degrees by wildlife legislation, notably bats, badgers, slow-worms, great crested newts, common lizards and grass snakes.

5.2 Mechanisms Targeting the Habitat

These current actions are ongoing. They need to be supported and continued in addition to the new action listed under Section 7.

5.2.1 Promotion of wildlife gardening

Wildlife gardening is gaining acceptance and understanding, particularly as a result of promotion by the media. There has been a move towards more sustainable practices and products. The broad popular appeal of wildlife gardening has led to various articles, books and programmes including the BBC's popular 'Charlie's Wildlife Gardens' series.

Permanent demonstration gardens have been established recently to inspire and educate the public. These are found, for example, at the Natural History Museum, the London Wildlife Trust's Centre for Wildlife Gardening, London Zoo, the Wetland Centre, and in various city farms and community gardens. Kew Gardens also has several areas managed to attract wildlife. Wildlife gardens at flower shows in London are popular with the public and have won recognition from judges.

Printed information to assist would-be wildlife gardeners have been produced by various organizations, including Gardening Which?, Royal Horticultural Society, London Wildlife Trust and Froglife. Several London boroughs including Redbridge, Bromley and Croydon have produced wildlife gardening information for local residents.

Training programmes, talks and practical events have been provided by groups including BTCV, London Wildlife Trust, Horniman Museum and the Worker's Education Association. As many mainstream horticultural courses include units on wildlife and organic gardening, a number of modern landscapers are qualifying with an understanding of a wildlife garden. Froglife's innovative London Pond Doctor service offers free advice to gardeners on how to make their gardens attractive to amphibians. To assist gardeners in choosing appropriate plants for their region, Flora for Fauna have produced a database, selectable by postcode, which is accessible on the internet.

Competitions, family events, free-tree schemes and many other projects have raised the profile of wildlife in gardens. A national wildlife gardening competition was launched this year by the Daily Telegraph working with the Wildlife Trusts.

5.2.2 Survey and monitoring

A number of public surveys have invited gardeners to send in their findings on easily recognised species. Six thousand records of stag beetle sightings were recorded in surveys carried out by the London Wildlife Trust, LB Bromley and the People's Trust for

Endangered Species. A London Wildlife Trust 'Wildlife in Gardens' survey attracted 4400 responses and was further developed by various local authorities and borough partnerships. Detailed surveys of garden ponds have been carried out in Merton, Ealing, Croydon and Dulwich.

The London Ecology Unit and LB Sutton undertook a detailed study of birds in suburban gardens, demonstrating clearly that the diversity of bird species increases with garden size.

A survey has been made of the Wildlife Garden at the Natural History Museum, demonstrating the value of very central areas for a wide range of invertebrates and birds.

On a national scale, the Garden Birdwatch survey is collated annually by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and currently has around 400 surveyors in London; an ongoing National Butterfly Survey is carried out by Butterfly Conservation; and the Garden Mammal Survey is carried out by the Mammal Society.

6. Flagship Species

These special animals are characteristic of private gardens in London.

Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus europaeus</i>	Possibly one of the most popular species in the capital. Renowned for eating slugs. Absent from central London. Threats include road traffic, steep-sided ponds, and the consumption of slugs that are dying from slug pellets.
Common frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>	Frogs can be found across London, and provide fascination to many gardeners. Their main requirements are sunny ponds for breeding, damp cover for hunting and undisturbed places for hibernation.
Dragonflies	Odonata	The whirring wings of dragonflies bring delight to all. They need medium to large sunny open ponds, without fish, which shelve gently and have appropriate marginal planting.
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	Found in shrubby corners of even the most central areas. Wrens prefer to hide from view but give themselves away with their explosive trilling song.
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Admired for its fine singing. Present throughout London wherever there are low dense shrubs and lawns.
Ladybird	Coccinellids	Loved by children and gardeners. Obvious threats include excessive pesticide use and destruction of hibernation sites.
Bumblebee	<i>Bombus</i> spp.	Present in most gardens, and particularly visible when visiting nectar- rich garden flowers.
Small tortoiseshell butterfly	<i>Aglais urticae</i>	Relies on large sunny nettle patches for its caterpillars. The adult butterfly's particular garden favourites include ice plant, lavender, hebe, field scabious and aubretia.
Holly blue butterfly	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>	Notable particularly for having two generations with different caterpillar foodplants, the berries of holly and the flower buds of ivy.

7. Objectives, Actions and Targets

Most of these actions are specific to this habitat. However, there are other, broader actions that apply generically to a number of habitats and species. These are located in a separate 'Generic Action' section which should be read in conjunction with this document. There are generic actions for Site Management, Habitat Protection, Species Protection, Ecological Monitoring, Biological Records, Communications and Funding.

Please note that the partners identified in the tables are those that have been involved in the process of forming the plan. It is not an exclusive list and new partners are both welcomed and needed. The leads identified are responsible for co-ordinating the actions – but are not necessarily implementers.

Objective 1 To protect the overall resource of private gardens in London by discouraging building on existing gardens.

Target: Publish policy and criteria for gardens by 2003

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Establish policy and criteria for protection from built development of garden sites and publicise	2003	GLA	LA

Objective 2 Assess and monitor biodiversity in gardens

Target: Compile baseline information on wildlife in gardens by 2004

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Repeat London Wildlife Trust's 'Wildlife in Gardens' survey	2002	LWT	LA
Carry out attitudinal surveys of garden centre users	2002	LWT	GW
Continue survey of home pesticide use and report on findings	2003	PAN	Working group
Develop individual gardeners' monitoring skills through structured training	2003	NHM	Working group, GLA
Increase the number of participants in the Garden Birdwatch survey to 1000	2003	BTO	Working group
Compile and compare survey information	2004	Working group	GLA

Objective 3 Raise public awareness of wildlife gardening and counter common myths and barriers

Target: Publish wildlife gardening guide by 2003 and ensure wildlife garden category included in Borough in Bloom competitions by 2005

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Establish a Wildlife Gardens Working Group	2002	LWT	LA, LWT, Froglife, PAN, RBGK, NHM, GW, CPG, RHS, FCF&CG, GLA, Others
Promote demonstration wildlife gardens which are open to the public in London	2002	LWT	FCFCG, Working group
Produce a wildlife gardening guide for London's wildlife gardeners	2002	LWT/GLA	Working group
Develop and implement mechanisms to support garden centres in marketing wildlife friendly products and providing advice	2003	LWT	Froglife
Promote information on wildlife gardening talks and training throughout London.	2003	Working group	Horticultural colleges
Develop a plan to hold a wildlife gardeners gathering	2004	Working Group	LWT, NHM
Ensure wildlife gardening categories in Borough in Bloom competitions and in London in Bloom	2005	LA	Working group

Relevant Action Plans

London Plans

Chalk Grassland, Reptiles; Churchyards and Cemeteries; Parks, Squares & Amenity Grassland; Bats; House Sparrow; Grey Heron; Stag Beetle; Mistletoe.

House martin, Humble Bumble and Exotic Flora statements.

National Plans

Built Environment and Gardens; Long tongued bumble bee; Stag Beetle.

Key References

Honey, M R, Leigh, C & Brooks, S J (1998). *The flora and fauna of the newly created Wildlife Garden in the grounds of the natural history museum*. The London Naturalist No. 77.

Owen, J (1991). *The Ecology of the Garden*. Cambridge University Press.

Vickery, M (1998). *Gardening for Butterflies*. The British Butterfly Conservation Society Ltd.

Abbreviations

BTO - British Trust for Ornithology
CPG - Chelsea Physic Garden
FCF&CG - Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens
GLA - Greater London Authority
GW – Gardening Which?
LA - Local Authorities

LWT - London Wildlife Trust
PAN - Pesticides Action Network
RBGK - Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew
RHS - Royal Horticultural Society
NHM - Natural History Museum

Contact

The Lead for this habitat is the London Wildlife Trust.

Helen Firminger
London Wildlife Trust
Centre for Wildlife Gardening
28 Marsden Road
London SE15 4EE

Tel 020 7252 9186
email lwtwildgarden@cix.co.uk
web www.wildlifetrust.org.uk/london