

# IDEAS FOR IMPROVING YOUR GARDEN TO HELP WILDLIFE AND THE PLANET

According to Ordnance Survey 25-30% of the urban surface in the UK is covered by residential gardens and yards. Making small changes to our own spaces can have a large cumulative impact if we all do something.

## plant a tree

Not all of us have space but if every one of the UK's 30 million gardeners planted one medium sized tree and let it grow to maturity, they'd store the same amount of carbon produced by driving 11million times round the planet <sup>(1)</sup> And for example, silver birch has 229 associated insect species which in turn support birds and mammals <sup>(2)</sup>



## a hedge instead of a fence?

If you are thinking about replacing a fence why not plant a hedge of native <sup>(3)</sup> species? It will take about four years to grow into a decent hedge and be a home for nesting and feeding birds and insects. If you do need to put a fence in remember to leave a gap underneath it so hedgehogs can get in and out of your garden. Castle Howard Tree Nursery (<https://www.castlehoward.co.uk/shopping-and-eating/shopping/tree-nursery>) sells good quality native hedge mixes ready to plant. Planting is best carried out in the winter months.

## untidy can be good

Insects and mammals can flourish in undisturbed corners of the garden. If you have any woody branches or logs then putting them in a pile in a quiet corner can bring great benefits. The logs provide homes for insects, slugs and worms which in turn can be food for hedgehogs and birds. As the timber rots and decomposes the activity of bacteria and fungi create nutrients and organic matter to enrich your garden soil.



## flowers, berries, layers

Plant species that flower at different times of year. These are a source of nectar for pollinators like bees, hoverflies and butterflies. Plant shrubs and hedgerows with plants that provide cover and produce berries and fruit as a food source for birds and mammals.

Species native to the UK are good for wildlife but non-native/ornamental garden plants, such as lavender, buddleia and hebe, can bring great benefits too. Have a look at the plant lists on the RHS website: <https://www.rhs.org.uk/science/conservation-biodiversity/wildlife/plants-for-pollinators>

Layering your planting creates rich habitats, similar to those in nature, with a tree and shrub layer, flowering plants, groundcover and grassland. You can have a look at this article for more information:

[https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/mar/25/garden-multilayer-forest-biodiverse-tom-massey-rhs?CMP=Share\\_AndroidApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/mar/25/garden-multilayer-forest-biodiverse-tom-massey-rhs?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other)



## green rather than grey

Making as much of your garden green (planting) instead of grey (paving) is a good principle to aim for. Soft areas of your garden allow water to soak away (reducing citywide flood risk) and the soil underneath is healthier. Healthy soil absorbs more carbon and is better for growing plants.

If 30 million gardeners pulled up a paver and planted 1m<sup>2</sup> of perennial plants (either herbaceous, shrubs or trees) in their community, school, workplace or garden and allowed it to develop to maturity, depending on the plants grown this would be equivalent to heating between 86,000 to more than one million homes for a year! <sup>(1)</sup>

## make a compost heap

Making your own compost saves waste, saves carbon emissions and improves your soil.

Carbon saving quantities linked to home composting (as opposed to buying bagged retail compost) are equivalent to 1.85 miles (driven by average car) saved per kg of home compost made. Every 1kg of homemade compost typically saves over 0.1kg fossil CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, which could save more than 5.1 kg carbon, per gardener, every year <sup>(1)</sup>



image: creative commons Pxfuel



## let your grass grow

If you have a lawn, leaving parts of it to grow longer brings lots of benefits for wildlife providing a home for many insects including beetles, moths and grasshoppers, as well as food for foraging birds and mammals.

If you want to keep it looking neater, mow the edges of the area shorter and cut your 'meadow' in mid-late August so it greens up before winter. You can add wildflowers using wildflower seed or wildflower turf. Meadows prefer nutrient poor soil so never use fertiliser.

## homes for wildlife

Putting up birdboxes, bat boxes, building insect hotels and creating hedgehog homes can all help improve the chances for wildlife to flourish in our city. Bird feeders are a good help in winter and during the spring nesting season - but clean them regularly to reduce the spread of diseases.



image: Wikimedia commons - W.Carter

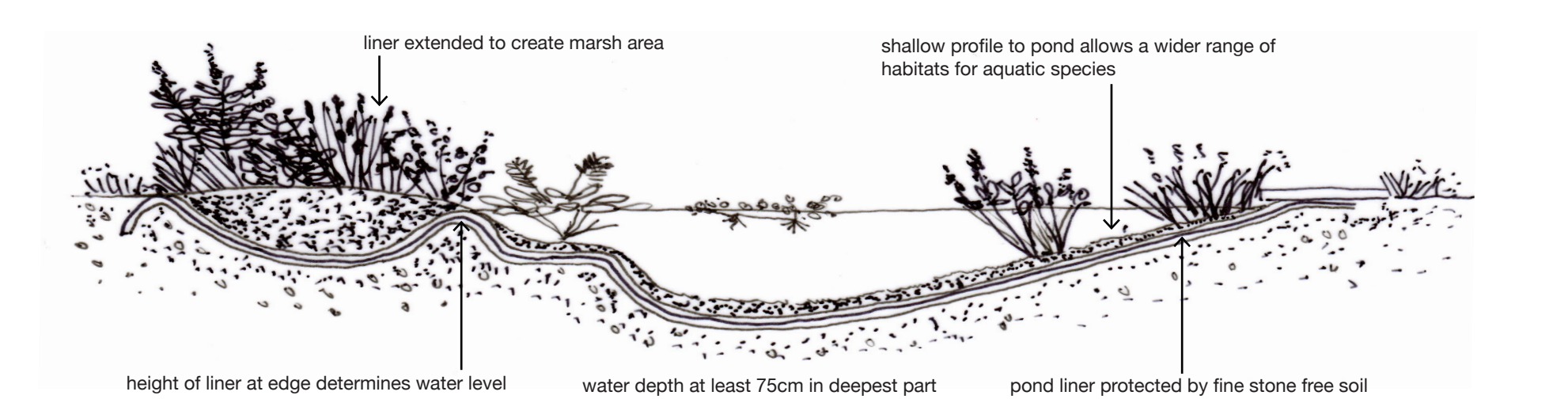


image: creative commons Pxfuel

## water and ponds

Saving rainwater in a water-butt attached to your roof downpipes is a good way to save on your water bills and reduce your carbon footprint (tap water requires significant energy inputs to treat it).

Even in a small space you can try creating a pond or wetland using an old ceramic sink. Water areas support a wide range of insects and pondlife and are often a richer habitat than any other part of your garden. If you have space to create a larger pond keep the banks as shallow as possible to support a wider range of wetland plants and create different habitats - they're safer for hedgehogs too, who can drown in steep sided ponds.



## more information..

REFERENCES & NOTES:  
(1) <https://www.rhs.org.uk/gardening-for-the-environment/planet-friendly-gardening-tips>  
(2) Kennedy C and Southwood T, The number of species of insects associated with British trees.  
(3) Native plants are those that are naturalised in the UK rather than introduced as ornamental garden species. Our native birds and insects tend to be better adapted to using native plants as part of their lifecycle.  
For more detailed information and research references have a look at:  
RHS document <https://www.rhs.org.uk/science/pdf/climate-and-sustainability/urban-greening/gardening-matters-urban-greening.pdf>

Poster created for Greener Cleaner Fulford by John MacCleary, Landscape Architect, Leeds Beckett University.





**any other ideas for improving gardens for wildlife and the planet?**

please feel free to add and share ideas here using post-it notes: