



SHEFFIELD
ALLOTMENTS
FEDERATION

Grow better crops

Encouraging wildlife on allotments

As an allotment holder you are a custodian of a part of the urban landscape that is as important as the rural landscape in conserving wildlife. Sheffield has a network of "green corridors" through which wildlife travels, including our many allotment sites.

This leaflet introduces ways of encouraging a wide range of beneficial insects and other creatures on to your plot, helping protect your crops from common pests and diseases.



Start with the Soil

Around 5% of topsoil consists of microbial biomass, mainly bacteria and fungi, that helps make nutrients available to your crops. It also provides habitat and food for others, for example worms and grubs that birds eat.

You can conserve and increase microbial biomass, and thereby create fertile, moisture retentive soil by:

Making compost from as wide a range of organic materials as you can manage. In most instances, you can best apply it as a mulch to integrate slowly and naturally with existing topsoil.

Growing green manure crops when the soil may otherwise lay bare. Good examples are rye or field beans sown in the autumn for overwintering, buckwheat, phacelia or mustard during summer months.

Exploring “no-dig” methods, as routine turning over of soil damages fungal networks and soil structure.

A microbe rich soil can contain mycorrhizal fungi and antibiotic species that help protect crops from environmental stress and from common fungal and bacterial infections.



Creating and managing habitats

Sympathetic treatment of the various features of an allotment can help provide shelter, nesting zones and feeding stations for a vast amount of wildlife.

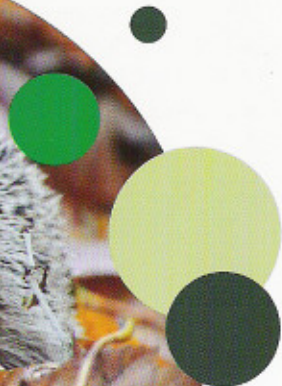
If you have a hedge, try only to cut it between September and early March, as you may well find birds will be nesting in it during spring and summer.

Many creatures such as frogs, toads, newts, and hedgehogs live in the shelter provided at the base of hedges, and you can enhance their habitat by laying small piles of leaves, woody trimmings and scrap (untreated) timber along here. Plant flowers at the base of hedges such as daffodils, primroses and knapweed to feed bees and other beneficial insects.

Old bricks, stones or concrete can be piled up in a sunny spot and planted with herbs that like dry conditions to provide food and habitat for mini beasts and birds. A similar pile in a damp shady spot will attract slug eating creatures such as frogs, toads and beetles. Pile the materials loosely so there are plenty of spaces that can be used for hibernation.

Sheds and greenhouses are useful for hibernating butterflies, and aphid-eating ladybirds and lacewings. You can also make other hibernating facilities and "bug hotels" out of all sorts of waste materials.

Remember that metaldehyde based slug pellets should be avoided as they can poison wildlife such as birds and hedgehogs.





Flowers and seeds for food

Pollen and nectar from flowers on your plot not only help feed bees and butterflies, but also hoverflies, lacewings and parasitic wasps whose young feast on pests such as aphids and red spider mites. Having food around for the adults means they are more likely to produce young where you might need them.

Try and grow a range to flower for as many months as possible.

Snowdrop, crocus and daffodil, as well as hardy annual flowers sown in autumn, will all blossom in spring and feed emerging insects, especially bees, who will later on help pollinate fruit crops. Try small patches of annual flowers among vegetable crops, good examples being calendula, buckwheat, candytuft, poached egg plant.

Leave some vegetable plants to flower. You can even transplant them

during early spring to a convenient space. Good examples are: carrot and parsnip which are liked by hoverflies and parasitic wasps; leeks and onions liked by bees. Popular culinary herbs have flowers relished by insects, such as fennel, coriander, chamomile, parsley, lovage and thyme.

Moths love night scented flowers such as honeysuckle, nicotiana and sweet rocket.

Leave seed heads on your flowered plants as they provide food for birds during the winter, especially finches, and may distract them from eating emerging fruit buds. Extra food put out for birds such as blue tits can be useful so that they get in the habit of visiting your allotment, then they will be around to control problem pests such as sawfly and codling moth.



Friend or foe?

Depending on the circumstances, some wildlife can be a benefit or a problem to allotment gardeners:

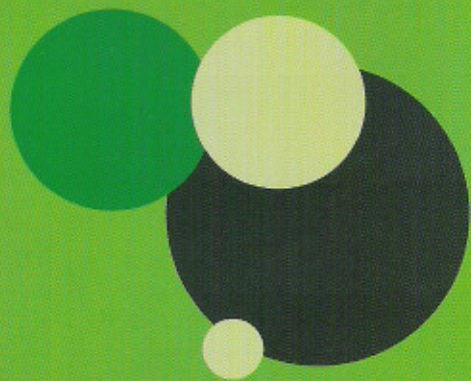
Wasps are excellent hunters and will eat many caterpillars of pests such as cabbage white butterfly, yet become a problem later on when they damage fruit. Growing lemon balm with your fruit bushes can keep them away at this time.

Earwigs may cause some damage to fruit and ornamental flowers, but they are also effective predators of woolly aphid and the apple damaging codling moth.

While many people don't like spiders, it can't be denied that many species, especially wolf spiders, are excellent hunters of pest mites, aphids, codling

and winter moth and midges. Organic matter mulches around your crops encourage wolf spiders to go hunting around your veg patch.

It is estimated that only about 10% of insect species are pests, the other 90% either neutral or beneficial to gardeners. Therefore it is worth properly identifying any suspected pest or disease you see on your crops to verify whether they really present a threat to your plants. Healthy plants can grow through many minor pest and disease attacks. Collars around stems, and netting or fine meshes applied over crops at the right time are more effective than using pesticides.



There is a wealth of books, websites and apps that will help you identify the wildlife living on or passing through your allotment.

With an understanding of the cycle of the seasons and the interplay of wildlife with your crops you can devise your own ways of encouraging wildlife that also makes your growing successful.

For more information about wildlife friendly gardening:

www.gardenorganic.org.uk

www.rspb.org.uk

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www.heeleyfarm.org.uk

www.wortleyorganic.org

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