

## Gardening for, with or against wildlife?

We moved to the outskirts of Amersham at the end of March 2005. This is an updated version of something I wrote 6 months after moving.

An altercation on the lawn the other day set me to wondering “whose garden is it?” – after all, we were paying the mortgage. A trio of green woodpeckers settled on the lawn, kindly aerating it for us (definitely gardening with wildlife) when one of our resident magpies (they nest at the top of one of our trees) came down and tried to scare them off. Two did fly off, but the third stood its ground and eventually the magpie backed off and left the lawn to the woodpecker.

Gardening for wildlife is obvious, and I hope it is something we all do to a certain extent. We have a line of eleven 100 year old lime trees planted about 6 feet apart along the bottom of our garden, and another four along the side, intermingled with the neighbour’s sycamores. Before we moved here the trees had been topped off (at about half as high again as the house), and there is now splendid coppice growth between the trees. Almost, but not quite, thick enough for nightingales. Behind the lime trees we have another 8 feet of garden, overlooking farmland. This is heavily shaded, but makes a splendid woodland walk, and it’s here that we keep the compost bins, etc. Lots of lovely habitats here. Also a fine crop of wild arum in spring, but no berries this autumn; presumably the plants were too damaged by squirrels (and other wildlife) to set seed.

Both on the woodland path and on the lawn we have a fine collection of fungi. The lawn boasts not only the usual lawn / meadow fungi, including shaggy ink caps, but also woodland species. While I was raking up leaves (with all the trees this is a matter of gardening with, or perhaps despite, wildlife, but we had a splendid compost heap after only 6 months in the house) I saw a small *Amethystina* in the lawn. This means that I can disguise my lack of lawn pride by saying that I keep the lawn for wildlife, not for weedkiller and lawn sand manufacturers.

More gardening for wildlife: obviously, a bird bath, bird table and seed and nut feeders. The garden bird list has topped 30; the most exotic to date are the pheasant that was a regular visitor in spring and early summer, and the peregrine falcon that sat on the bird bath for quite a time one afternoon (but flew off as soon as I brought the camera to the window). Greater spotted woodpeckers bred this year, but the juvenile was blown off course during a gale and smashed into the side of the house. We have a (very noisy) tawny owl, and after living in a busy street in Kenton, it is a pleasure to be woken up by owls hooting and deer barking, rather than traffic noise.

Equally obviously, a pond for our koi, and within a month of digging it we had a good collection of frogs of various sizes. The pond was urgent, because the koi were unhappy in the over-size water tank we moved them in. We know they were unhappy, because they refused food! The tank has now become a bog garden in the middle of a rockery, and frogs have not only discovered the water, but also the sheltered habitat provided by gaps in the soil around and under the tank.

The farmland beyond our fence is a splendid wildlife reserve. The farmer obviously makes his money on this field by growing EU subsidies for set-aside / country stewardship, and it is delightfully untended, with nettles, brambles and a few seedling trees, as well as a hawthorn hedge (more bird food) along one side, and a now-deserted fox den.

Gardening with (or despite) wildlife includes the problem of leaves mentioned above, plus the problem of the incredible fertility of our lime trees, the sycamores at no 6 and the horse chestnuts at number 10. A constant succession of seedling trees to be pulled up. Of course, the birds also try to grow their own food, and we have small elder trees and holly bushes – but I have to grub up cherry, hawthorn, sycamore and horse chestnut seedlings, as well as brambles. On the positive side, gardening with wildlife also includes a very fine population of worms in the soil, so that we are able to dispose of some of our leaves in trenches in the borders. Of course, if I were lawn proud I would have to do something about the wormcasts on the lawn, but I have become rather attached to the blackbird that starts looking for worms at the same time as I come down to make the early morning coffee. In winter it is still dark, but there is just enough light to see him sitting motionless on the lawn, waiting for it to be light enough to see his breakfast, then hopping around, almost always following the same pattern.

Gardening against wildlife is a matter of defensive action. We don't mind the fox and squirrels coming to the pond to drink, but the day a muntjak deer came over the back fence and started nibbling the sweet peas and courgette plants was the time to take action. After all, we do have some pride in the plants we grow in the garden, it's not all for wildlife. Only a mild defensive action – a matter of raising the 3 foot high chain link fence overlooking the farmland. We still have the gap under the fence that the foxes and cats use. The other defensive action concerns the pond, which has to be netted in late summer and autumn because of the leaves, and be festooned with chains to deter herons the rest of the year.

During the mile walk to the station, I often disturb a considerable number of blackbirds and robins in the splendid hedges and little pockets of woodland in this part of the town, before I come to the hedge that you can hear from 100 yards away – it has a large flock of very noisy sparrows. Finally, if I am lucky, there will be jackdaws to watch around the station platform while I am waiting for the train.