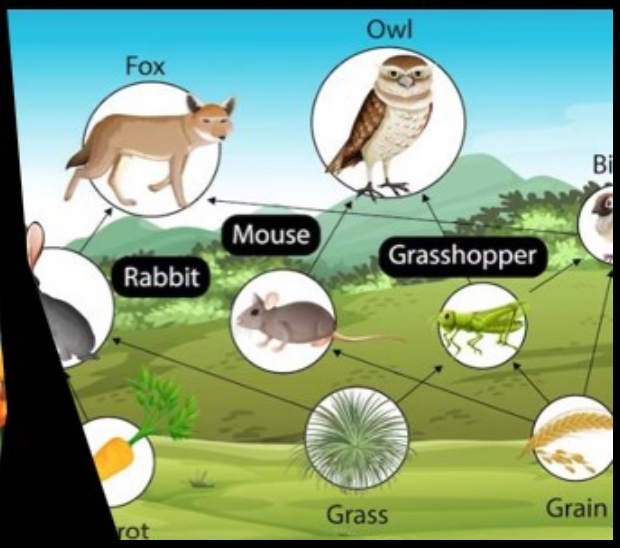
4Bs Nature Magazine

Gardening & Farming for Biodiversity



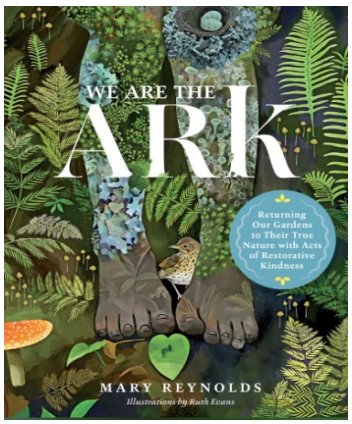
Issue #1 November 2024

Editor : We all need to be inspired from time to time and in the context of Gardening for Biodiversity we have within our community a couple – Paul and Claire Ritchie who have walked the talk for over a decade. Their garden is cultivated for nature – a true ARK in the sense that most of their garden has been designed to help wildlife flourish. Paul is a Zoologist and a former ranger so he knows what he is doing. He is much local knowledge about nature and he has lent his support to the 4Bs Biodiversity Initiative. He takes a keen interest in the wildlife that inhabits his garden and every year he produces an annual report to account for the what he has observed.

A Place Where Wild Things Flourish
Paul & Clare Ritchie

"We're not just losing the wild world. We're forgetting it. We're no longer noticing it. We've lost the habit of looking and seeing and listening and hearing. We're beginning to act as if nature is not there anymore."
Simon Barnes

Our Acts of Restorative Kindness



Where better to reconnect with the natural world and make space for nature than in our own gardens? Our Annual Garden Report, through which we create a record of the wildlife in our garden, reflects that ethos. It shares our approach for returning our south facing garden to its true nature with what Mary Reynolds calls an Act of Restorative Kindness (ARK), so that it becomes part of an older world that provides a haven for wildlife. In building our ARK we are focusing on restoring native ecosystems and creating habitats that offer sanctuary for wildlife and people. In achieving our aim we are helping nature flourish and increasing biodiversity within the space we own.

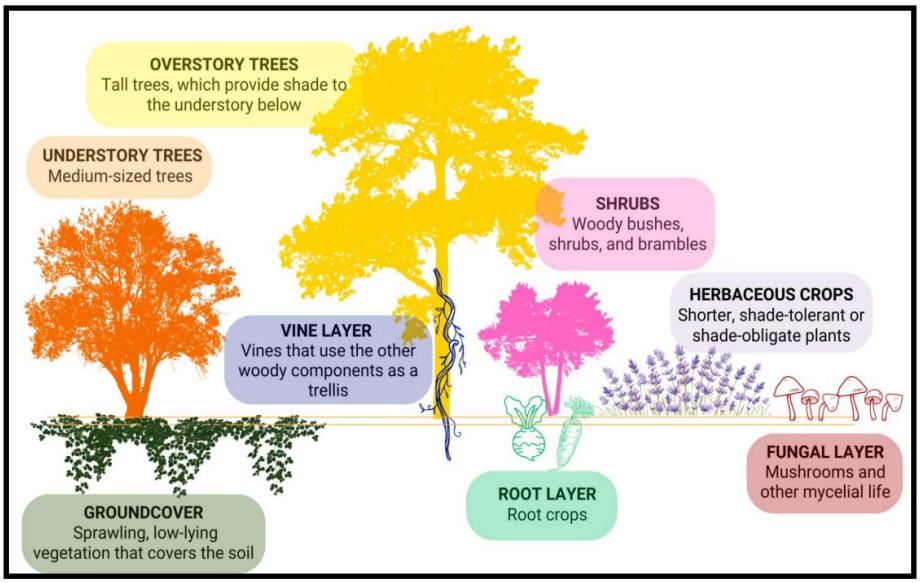
Our approach to encouraging biodiversity

For a decade our garden has been a place for family and friends that we have happily shared with wildlife in all its forms. We have a large field maple tree, a variety of smaller native and exotic trees and shrubs, an ancient hedgerow, long grass areas, a wildflower meadow, a rocky gravel beach area and a pond. We have recorded a variety of native plants, which provide food and shelter for insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals that visit our garden to feed, drink and breed. In the past these habitats and wildlife coexisted happily with a family of four, a dog, chickens, guinea pigs, rabbits and numerous human visitors of all ages. For people there are seated areas, a patio, a lawn path, a vegetable patch, a bothy and a workshop.

Ecology – the science of living places

To understand ecology is to understand the science of life and our garden is a living place. Basically, wildlife gardening is all about the principles of permaculture – cooperating with nature rather than fighting against it. We made space for wildlife rather than trying to control it! This is what we are doing.

Providing habitats (homes) will attract wild plants and animals by providing food, water, shelter and space. A wild garden is enhanced by layered planting (**vertical structure**) of trees, shrubs, flowers, grasses and ground cover plants. **Horizontal structure** in height, depth and density of plants provides more places for insects and other animals to feed and find shelter.



A third dimension is **species diversity** if plants are allowed to naturally seed and grow in a garden. Many insect larvae are adapted to feed on specific native species of plant. Having a variety of self-seeding plants, especially native species, will help insects to complete their **life cycles** and provide food for carnivorous insects, spiders, birds and mammals.

Gardens like all **ecosystems** are four dimensional and dynamic places. **Time** affects plant and animal communities so you must give nature space and time to establish natural processes. Plants are the foundation of **food webs** for herbivores that are all preyed upon by carnivorous beetles, wasps, dragonflies, spiders, amphibians, reptiles, birds and small mammals.

Wilding is a concept of giving land back to nature and encouraging wildlife back to the land. It is all about restoring natural processes, reviving degraded habitats and returning depleted or missing species to the landscape. We apply this concept to our garden by 'cultivating chaos' and creating conditions that are suitable for self-seeding plants to thrive. We follow a 'permaculture' approach to creating sustainable habitats for humans to by connecting with nature.

Four principles guide our wild/wildlife garden

Wilding is a simple idea but is it achievable in a garden? Yes - because that has been our approach to gardening for the last decade. We achieved this reconnection with nature by following the four basic principles that cater for the needs and make space for wild plants and animals.

Food – is more than just bird feeders. To attract insects that will provide food for birds and other animals, it is important to provide some native flowers, shrubs and trees.
Bird feeders
Nectar rich flowers
Fruit trees or berry bearing shrubs
Perennials left uncut over winter
Vegetable patch, beds or pots
Herb garden or pots

Water – all life on Earth is composed of and reliant on water. Providing a constant supply of fresh water for wildlife is often the important thing missing from most gardens.
Wildlife pond (no fish)
Bog garden or permanently wet area
Bucket pond
Bird bath
Drought tolerant plants
Water butts for rainwater

Shelter –is the next important thing for animals after having a drink and feeding. A place to avoid the heat of the day, cold spells, heavy rain or the interest of predators.
Dead wood, log or stone pile
Native trees , shrubs or hedge
Climbing plants on wall or trellis
Area of lawn left to grow long
Small wild flower meadow
Bird, mammal or insect boxes

Safety – is about protecting wildlife from harm and changing how we garden. **Organic gardening** in cooperation with nature rather than trying to control wild plants and animals.
Not using pesticides or slug pellets
Not using chemical weed killers
Not cutting hedges March - August
Using peat-free compost
Using a compost bin or wormery
Using hand tools for gardening

A **permaculture approach** to gardening means that we focus on the soil, it's condition and natural succession from a bacteria dominated ecosystem to one served primarily by fungi. We also relaxed our innate desire to control nature and have reaped the reward!

Garden Projects

In addition to delivering routine gardening jobs safely it is satisfying to have a project that will offer opportunities for food, water and shelter. We were busy during 2022 making a community garden but that has not stopped undertaking projects at home to benefit people and wildlife.

Dead hedges – a supply of woody cuttings, tree and shrub brash and hazel poles enabled me to build a dead hedge along the southern boundary of our garden adjacent to the Greensand Way. This not only ensured that our tenure boundary was secure without replacing the old wire fencing but also it has created a semi-natural habitat for wildlife. We planted a large number of native tree and shrub whips alongside this new structure to create a natural hedge in the long-term.

Naturalised Plants

This year we continued to record various species of wildflowers; grasses, sedges and rushes; trees, shrubs and climbers; and aquatic plants in our garden.

We have populations of self-seeded perennials such as dandelion, cat's ear, ox-eye daisy, clover, knapweed, wild carrot and bedstraw. We supplemented these naturally occurring wild species by planting cowslips, primrose, lavender, marjoram, thyme, goldenrod and mugwort.

Whilst we prefer self-seeding of wildflowers we disturb the ground as in cornfields and sow annuals such as cornflower, corncockle, corn marigold, common poppy, yellow rattle, borage and evening primrose. We have introduced native species of aquatic plants into a wildlife pond.

Climbers including bramble, wild rose, ivy, honeysuckle and white bryony grow in our old native hedgerow of hawthorn, blackthorn, elm, elder, hazel and privet. In addition, we have exotic shrubs and maiden specimens of native field maple, birch, rowan, hawthorn, cherry and apple.

Wild Animals

Our wild garden was visited by a variety of mammal, birds, amphibians, reptiles and invertebrates, which I record according to my ability to identify rather than their frequency.

Both species of stag beetle living in log piles; 3 species of ant benefitting from reduced lawn mowing; large numbers of skippers and gatekeepers thriving in hedgerow and long grass margins; and wasp spiders dining on grasshoppers were all exciting observations this year.

Other highlights were breeding field and bank voles and large a breeding population of slow worm benefitting from the naturalised hedgerow and long grass margins. Smooth newts, common frogs and toads all successfully bred again this year.

We recorded fewer species of butterfly and moth this summer because we were unable to carry out our usual surveys. Our bird numbers were also reduced, which does not necessarily reflect their local populations, and I record species that are seen feeding on land adjacent to our garden.

Keeping Records

One aspect of enjoying our wild garden is recording and taking photographs of the wild plants and animals that make their home there. We also report our sightings to a variety of organisations to maintain local and national records that help inform decision-making for conservation. This year we took part in the Big Butterfly Count and the Plantlife Every Flower Counts project again.

A list of the species we have identified in our garden together with useful resources and links can be found at: https://www.biodiversitypark.uk/magazine.html

Sorbus Learning CIC was set up to realise our shared passion for outdoor learning, wildlife gardening and wilding. Our aim was to provide opportunities for lifelong learning about ecology, conservation, countryside skills and rural crafts and arts for adults. www.sorbuslearning.co.uk