

Living Life on the Wild Side.

As a sport-mad child growing up in the neighbouring village of Pakenham, I didn't care too much for the flora and fauna in my parents' garden. Fast-forward 30 years and after 3 years of having our own green space, my outlook is a very different one indeed.

During these past three years, I have gradually been designing and developing our front garden areas, with an emphasis on wanting to encourage biodiversity, and create a healthy and vibrant ecosystem, where wildlife can flourish, amidst a diverse range of habitats and plants. A place that can allow my wife and I to connect with the wildlife that visits, and at the same time, to disconnect from the demands and rigours of everyday life away from the home.

The journey has had its lumps and bumps along the way so far, however, this past year has seen the most pleasing results in terms of bringing flora and fauna together in the garden.

It all began with the arrival of statuesque Alliums en masse in May, planted as bulbs the previous September, attracting bumblebees galore, followed by the decision to keep the battery mower locked away in the shed for the rest of the year and embrace the 'No Mow May' annual campaign for the first time.

This was the highlight of the year, allowing the existing lawn turf to grow and flower, save for a narrow mown path cutting through the long grass for access. The longer grass encouraged grass moths in droves, with a beautiful Cinnabar moth also spotted. Dandelions were left to flower, as these are valuable sources of nectar for pollinating insects.

We planted native Hawthorn hedging and different species of Holly as shrubs to create further habitat options for our garden birds, as well as providing them with a food source in the form of berries. Sightings and populations of Blackbirds, Sparrows, Blue Tits and Robins have certainly increased over the last 3 years as the garden has become more established. Autumn planting of a crab apple tree [variety 'Scarlett Brandywine'] will encourage pollinating insects with scented flowers in Spring followed by crab apple fruits in Autumn / Winter, providing a further food source for birds, as well as an opportunity for us to make some crab apple jelly!

Ditching the more manicured approach is definitely something I would recommend in helping our wildlife, which is in need of support from ourselves in light of current climate and environmental crises. Adopting organic principles and not using chemical pesticides or herbicides contributes greatly to creating and sustaining a healthy ecosystem, allowing soil-dwelling invertebrates and micro-organisms to work their magic beneath the surface, in turn creating healthy, fertile soils for our plants and crops to grow in. Tolerate a few more 'weeds' and let those leaves gather on bare soil in the autumn. They can act as a mulch, provide additional habitat for insects, alongside being dragged down into the soil by earthworms, and eventually broken down into nutrients that can be absorbed by your plants. Quite simply, we need to mimic the natural cycles of the landscapes beyond the boundaries of our own homes and gardens.

Looking ahead to this year, I plan to build on the success of 'No Mow May' with the creation of a wildflower meadow area using wildflower turf containing native species, with additional habitat creation in the form of a log wall. Sustainability is at the forefront of my mind as well, with a foray into the world of home composting. I am particularly keen on the hot composting method, so have invested in a HotBin, a great solution for those with more limited space. As part of our wish to connect and better understand the wildlife that visits our garden, this month we installed a wi-fi bird box camera in our RSPB nestbox, allowing us to view the comings and

goings in the nestbox up close, without causing any disturbance. Already we are happily watching Blue Tits checking out this potential site for the forthcoming nesting season! Exciting times...