



Writtle COLLEGE

a partner institution of the University of Essex

Chelsea Show Exhibit 2005

A Taste of the Wild

*What is a garden?
Goodness knows!
You've got a garden, -
I suppose:*

*To one it is a piece of ground
For which some gravel must be found.
To some, those seeds that must be sown,
To some a lawn that must be mown.
To some a ton of Cheddar rocks;
To some it means a window-box;
To some, who dare not pick a flower -
A man, at three-and-six an hour.
To some, it is a silly jest
About the latest garden pest;
To some, a haven where they find
Forgetfulness and peace of mind....*

*What is a garden?
Large or small,
'Tis just a garden,
After all.*

REGINALD ARKELL (1872-1959)





A Taste of the Wild?

For many of you visiting the show today, the displays and gardens that you see will represent a standard of excellence that seems remote from your own patch at home. That is of course the magic of this show. It deals in fantasies and presents a snapshot worthy of heaven. For a few short days, this leafy suburb of West London is utterly transformed with flowers from all seasons and all continents in an unrivalled spectacle that is assured to take your breath away.

Even the most dedicated gardeners among you are unlikely to have either the time or the inclination however, to spend every working hour outside in your garden trying to perfect nature to this extent. Indeed, this would be a strange and misguided thing to do as nature is inherently perfect from the start. Even in the most highly

manicured gardens, where skilled gardeners extract 'order from chaos,' it would be to no avail were it not for the rich and intricate web of life that holds it all together.

The essence of a garden is of course life itself – the plants that we grow often allowing us our closest contact with nature. For many the garden is a place to sit, relax and wonder; for others a place to grow food for the family plate, whilst some use it to provide a vital refuge for our native wildlife. The truth of the matter is however that we can have a garden that gives us all of this and more. There are many edible plants that can provide a wonderful display whilst providing a hearty meal for us and the wild creatures that share this space with us. Why should our gardens not provide a little bit of everything?

Gardens and gardening should always be fun. Fresh produce, grown naturally and picked with your hands is infinitely more satisfying than anything you can buy in a shop. What is more it is fresh to your plate and doesn't lose any of the precious flavour or vitamins.

For many though, the idea of a vegetable garden is rather intimidating, with rows of crops and an army of animals all intent on eating it before you. It need not be this way though. Produce gardens actually don't need to be tended fanatically. Why not try just growing them for fun? Many edible plants look great and can easily take the place of other garden plants. What is more, they often benefit wildlife and can attract a wealth of colourful and interesting visitors to your garden. Such a space can give you a true 'taste of the wild!'



Gardens and Biodiversity

Nature always achieves a balance. Even a paved courtyard, bereft of plants, will have thousands upon thousands of tiny occupants; from tiny mites scurrying through the 'moss forests' on shady walls to the occasional sparrow, scratching around for tasty morsels in nooks and crannies. Whatever we do to dominate it, life simply finds a way. Indeed, every garden has its wild occupants; from the millions of micro-organisms that inhabit the soil, to the more obvious inhabitants such as birds, bees and butterflies. The sum of all these species large or small is what is referred to as 'biodiversity.'

In the simplest terms, the more species of life your garden supports, the healthier the environment is. All of the creatures in your garden have

their role to play. Even a tiny bacterium in the soil plays a vital role in ensuring that nutrient is available for your plants. We all know that larger inhabitants such as hedgehogs and toads are useful in eating garden pests but often assume that the hated aphid has no role to play.

All species are important in respect of maintaining garden biodiversity and the loss of a single species inevitably has repercussions for others. A garden free of aphids for instance is also one free of ladybirds, lacewings and many hoverfly species; as each of these is a predator species. Better to encourage an army of them to clear the crop, than to try and kill the aphids themselves. In turn, many of these predator insects fall prey to larger animals, which are, in turn, eaten themselves. Ultimately, as

more animals inhabit a garden, a greater natural stability is achieved. Sure, there are always a few bugs in the salad leaves but these can be harmlessly cleaned and the food is just as nature intended. Remember that if an insect is sharing your food it is actually a proof of its purity!

Ultimately it is the large and pretty species that really grab our attention and it is these which our exhibit features most prominently. These showy characters are often the best indication of the overall health of your garden habitat. What is more, whilst you sit out in your garden larder, deciding which of the plants to grace your plate with, you can enjoy a wildlife spectacle that although diminutive, is every bit as exciting as the Great Plains of Africa.

“Gardening will either teach you patience or give you headaches. Take your pick. I choose patience.”

VITA SACKVILLE-WEST

Writtle College

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The College offers a range of full-time and part-time courses for school leavers, career changers and those wishing to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate study.

Writtle offers courses in horticulture, agriculture, leisure, business management, sport, environmental conservation, equine studies, animal science and design.

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Butterflies and gardens

Butterflies are the true aristocrats of the insect world, their bright colours enhancing the very flowers upon which they alight. Many of our native butterflies are becoming increasingly rare however and are now sadly often absent from our gardens. Pesticides, loss of breeding habitats and fragmentation of populations have all contributed to their demise.

Butterflies are generally thought to be a key indicator of the health of the surrounding environment; quite simply, the more species that visit your garden, the more environmentally friendly your neighbourhood is likely to be.

Butterflies need places to breed and some will doubtless choose your garden if they find the right plants. Sometimes this is a positive thing but in certain cases, it is then that the conflict begins. As the ravenous caterpillars munch their way through precious plants, gardeners often despair and resort all too quickly to the spray gun, killing not only the caterpillar but also the other occupants. The more balanced your garden habitat is though, the more likely that something will actually eat the caterpillars. Believe it or not, wasps are a prime consumer of caterpillars, ceaselessly hunting them down throughout early and mid summer.



Most butterflies only ever use the garden as a fuel stop however, stopping to sip nectar from flowers with their long tongues. Try to provide plants that will flower over a long period to help as many of these precious and delightful garden visitors as you can throughout the season.

"Happiness is a butterfly, which, when pursued, is always just beyond your grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you."

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

A Taste of

Feathered friends



Imagine a garden without birds. It would be a dreary place, almost akin to a flower bed without colours. Birds give something to a garden that is impossible to achieve with plants alone. Sadly, many bird species, once so common in our countryside, have become increasingly rare. Ten million house sparrows, once the most ubiquitous garden bird, have been lost since 1970. Gardens now provide an important refuge for many once common species and in a recent garden bird feeding survey, carried out in 265 gardens for the Thetford-based British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), 81 different species, from sparrowhawks to siskins, were recorded feeding or taking water in gardens.

Bird-friendly gardens help to provide a feeding station and watering hole for visitors and can be a nesting and roost site for garden resident birds. Making your

garden bird-friendly, doesn't mean that it has to be wild or overgrown though. Indeed, a bird-friendly garden can look attractive all year round. Growing a wide variety of plants to attract wildlife will provide you with something to look at whilst offering birds food and shelter to help them survive the winter and feed their hungry chicks in the spring.

A rich habitat of trees, shrubs and flowers is the key to planting for birds, to produce insects, fruits and seeds that will sustain the birds all year round. Leaving seed heads on from the previous year will help sustain them over the winter. If you use fruit trees and bushes, just throw a net over the ones that you want until you have harvested them but be sure to leave a few for your feathered friends. Always try and provide as much natural food as possible, supplementing this with feeders in the harsher winter months.

“There is nothing in which the birds differ more from man than the way in which they can build and yet leave a landscape as it was before.”

ROBERT LYND

the Wild

Garden bees

Bees are still a relatively common sight in most gardens, but even these creatures face an uncertain future with several species becoming quite rare in recent years. There are basically two types of bees; the social bees and the solitary bees.

Honey Bees are social bees which live together in large colonies, often numbering several thousand or more but with only one female - the queen - laying eggs. Other sterile female workers make up almost all the remainder of the colony, collecting pollen and nectar and raising the young until adulthood. They turn nectar to honey that will sustain the colony through the long winter months and a colony of honey bees will live



for several years or more. Bumble Bees are similar to Honey Bees in that they live in colonies dominated by one female queen. Their colonies are much smaller however, only lasting for one growing season as they do not store a large amount of honey. The queens emerge from hibernation early in the season and can be seen foraging even in quite cool conditions. Both Honey Bees and especially Bumble Bees are in serious decline throughout the UK.

Solitary bees, such as the Masonry Bees found nesting in walls, Leaf

Cutter Bees and the Mining Bees, often found in lawns, also forage for nectar and pollen in gardens. They are important pollinators of many garden plants and it is quite common to find some of the scarcer species using gardens, for both foraging and nesting.

Sadly many modern varieties of garden flower are poor nectar producers, being chosen mainly because of large showy blooms that are of little real benefit to insects. 'Old fashioned' varieties of nectar-producing plants and native wildflowers provide a tremendous benefit to bees as well as other nectar-dependant insects. Providing them with nesting sites will assure the future of these useful garden dwellers.

*“Give and take...
For to the bee a flower is a fountain of life
And to the flower a bee is a messenger of love
And to both, bee and flower,
the giving and the receiving is a need and an ecstasy.”*

KAHLIL GIBRAN





“This we know... the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to earth. All things are connected, like the blood which connects one family. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life - he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”

CHIEF SEATTLE, 1854

Did you know?

Encouraging biodiversity in the garden can encourage a range of natural predators that actually help to control garden pests. Many species such as beetles and hoverflies - animals that devour pest insects - will be encouraged into a garden that is also a healthy functioning ecosystem. Biodiversity takes time to build, but a garden that possesses great biodiversity will be less prone to pest outbreaks and will be a healthy place to grow food for your own table.

