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**Wildlife Friendly Vegetable Growing**

*Thank you to Andy Callow from Sherwood Garden Consultancy for providing the following information.*

**Part 1: Planning Your Space**

**Why garden in a wildlife-friendly way?**

The benefits of wildlife-friendly gardening are numerous. It's about living alongside and enjoying nature to its fullest by sharing your space with wildlife. There's a great pleasure to be had from that, but there are also real sustainable benefits to gardening with wildlife.

For example, having frogs in your pond will help keep down your slug and snail population. By encouraging them into your garden, you can reduce the number of slugs, which in turn enables you to have better crops.

A lot of the food we grow needs to be pollinated. Think about all your fruits: raspberries, currants, grapes, and hops all require pollination. Bees, moths, and butterflies need pollen to survive, so there's a symbiotic relationship at play. If we cover everything up or use pesticides to prevent insects from coming in and eating the crops, we're also preventing pollination. The more wildlife we can bring in, the more fruit and the greater yield you will get.

**Planning your space**

When planning a new space, you need to consider several factors. Think about where you're getting the water from, where you will compost, and where to place these in your garden relative to your fruit and veg. Consider how you will use the space and the eventual size of your plants. For instance, raspberry canes, which are small when you pick them up in February, will grow to be six feet tall and two feet across, taking up a lot of room for a long season.

It's really helpful to sketch out your garden, ideally to scale. You can pace it out, with one pace roughly equalling one metre. Draw out your beds and plan where you will plant different fruits and vegetables.

Another key consideration is your soil type, as it will impact what you can grow and how successfully. Additionally, consider the sun’s path across your garden. Use a compass on your phone to see how the sun travels. Some plants, like raspberries, don't mind a bit of shade, while others, like dahlias or chrysanthemums, prefer full sun. This information will help you plan your space efficiently and avoid feeling overwhelmed.

**Accessibility**

In terms of accessibility, it's crucial that you can move freely and comfortably through your plot, regardless of your needs. There’s nothing worse than having narrow pathways between beds, where you catch your knee while weeding or trip over someone else’s plants. Make your paths more generous than you think you need.

Wheelbarrow access is also important, especially to your compost area. Aim for paths that are 90 centimetres to 1.2 metres wide if possible, to ensure easy movement around your plot.

Consider how you are going to grow. Raised beds are an excellent way to define an area. If you have a bad year or are too busy, you can cover them with green mulch, cardboard, or membrane to keep the weeds down and deal with them the following year. Raised beds can also be made quite high, which, while requiring more soil, can be very good for accessibility. Beds can be designed to be wheelchair accessible or to allow people to garden while seated. Always think about the size and space around these beds, as it is crucial for ease of access and effective gardening.

**Part 2: Preparing Your Soil and Choosing Your Crops**

**Preparing your soil**

Before we think about what we want to grow, we need to consider the preparation of the soil. The top six inches of soil is crucial, and we all depend on it as a planet. We really need to look after that. For years, particularly in large-scale farming, we've been poisoning the soil and then fertilising it to grow crops.

In your own allotment or garden space, you have the opportunity to garden organically, for the planet and for nature, while still achieving great yields of crops. Here in Sherwood, we're on really poor soil. Despite mulching and feeding this soil with our own compost for the past few years, we're still on very sandy soil, often called "castle sand." This comes from the castle in the city, as much of Sherwood sits on a sandstone base.

Feeding that soil with compost is the number one thing you can do. You can make your own compost. We've got larger pallet bays, but you can also use black cones, often called "daleks," which are frequently available for free on Freecycle. To make compost, you need carbon, nitrogen, air, and water. Your carbon mainly comes from cardboard because it's challenging to create enough carbon on an allotment or in a garden space. Greens include all your cuttings, prunings, and vegetable peelings from home. When your broccoli has bolted, you can use that as well. Keep the compost aerated by turning it over regularly and leaving it open if possible.

When you've made that compost, you can heavily mulch your beds with it. Mulching simply means putting a generous layer of compost on top to suppress weeds. You don't need to dig it in; the worms will do that for you. The more we dig into the soil, the more we destroy the microorganisms living in it. While the double-dig method has been traditional, leaving the soil undisturbed and layering compost on top—known as the no-dig or low-dig approach—adds nutrients and allows worms and microorganisms to incorporate it into the soil naturally.

It's a good idea to put a thick layer of cardboard down to suppress weeds and reduce light, which will prevent weeds from growing, and then add your mulch on top. If it's your first year, you can buy peat-free compost, which is a great win. Well-rotted manure is also beneficial, but ensure it is well-rotted to avoid adding too much nitrogen to your beds. Leaves, your own compost, and prepared compost mulch from supermarkets or garden centres can also be used.

**Choosing your crops**

Next, think about what you want to grow. The most important consideration is what you enjoy eating and how much time you have to care for the plants. Although I run a gardening business and love gardening, my time for my allotment is limited, so my family and I prefer a low-maintenance approach.

We grow a lot of fruit, such as raspberries and rhubarb, which are easy to care for. A rhubarb plant from a nursery or garden centre, costing around seven or eight pounds, can provide rhubarb for years with minimal maintenance. Currants and raspberries are also low-maintenance and high-yielding. Strawberries produce a lot of fruit and require little upkeep.

Consider what you want to use the space for, how much time you have, what you like to eat, and the cost of buying equivalent produce. Growing rare and unusual crops can be interesting. Anything grown in your garden will taste better, being organic, pesticide-free, and local. You can even eat some produce like peas and strawberries directly from the garden.

Lastly, think about your staples, such as peas, carrots, and potatoes, and allocate space accordingly. Consider how much you might eat, how much you need, and how easy it is to store. This will help you plan your garden effectively.

**Part 3 – Creating a Sustainable and Wildlife-Friendly Space**

**Providing for pollinators**

Flowers, either wildflowers or what we wrongly assume as weeds, are really beneficial for bringing wildlife and pollinators into your garden. They also create habitats for creatures like frogs and hedgehogs, providing places for them to hide, breed, and find food.

I've included some domestic plants here, leftovers from my garden or split from other gardens. For example, we have sedum, which is great for autumn pollination, and domestic geraniums that I've split multiple times. There are also some grasses, along with daffodils, alliums, and self-seeded bluebells. These self-seeded plants, often considered weeds by others, contribute significantly to the garden's ecosystem. The alkanet, for example, is often confused with borage but has a beautiful blue, forget-me-not type flower that is excellent for pollinators, though it can become invasive if not kept in check.

We've also got red campion at the back, which has just started to take over and is now alive with insects and bees, attracting moths in the evening. Purposefully planting these flowers around your garden helps sustain wildlife.

**Providing habitat for wildlife**

Water is crucial in wildlife gardening. It supports dragonflies, damselflies, frogs, and newts, which help control the slug population. We are fortunate to have a large pond here, the focal point of this allotment. However, even a sunken trug or bucket can serve as a pond, provided there's a clear way for frogs, newts, badgers, and hedgehogs to get in and out safely.

Always aim to plant native wildflowers and pond plants, as they offer a beautiful range and are beneficial for local wildlife. A healthy pond should have about 60% cover of green planting to sustain wildlife.

Garden loosely, stand back, and let nature take its course. For example, blackfly on broad beans will soon be eaten by birds, so there's no need to worry.

Reduce mowing to promote wildlife habitats. While you need to keep paths accessible, allowing some areas to grow wild can support a diverse range of species. Balance is key; while nettles, brambles, and docks are beneficial, they can create a monoculture if left unchecked. Treat them as you would a flower bed, letting things grow naturally and observing the wildlife they attract.

Creating habitats is also important. Bird boxes can be installed on sheds, and taller structures can support bee and swift boxes. Bug hotels are fantastic projects, especially with children or community groups. Stack pallets and fill them with reclaimed bricks, tiles, straw, and rotting vegetation to create habitats for various creatures. Over winter, leave piles of open compost, leaves, and twigs, or create wigwams from canes stuffed with leaf matter. These provide shelter for mice, frogs, toads, and insects, which in turn attract birds.

**Sustainability**

For sustainability, practice organic gardening by avoiding pesticides and chemicals. Water butts are excellent for collecting rainwater, which is better for plants and the environment. If you don't have a shed to rig up guttering, large buckets or even old baths can collect water for use on your allotment.

Although peat-based compost is no longer available, which is great, but plants can still be sold in peat. So when buying plants, it’s better to shop locally to ensure they are well-suited to your environment, have low travel miles, and support local growers.

**Final tips**

Tackle your garden bit by bit. Start with an area clear of invasive weeds, and think carefully about what you want to grow. Begin small, perhaps with fruit, peas, or beans, and build from there. Talk to your neighbours for local advice and knowledge, and involve your community through work days and fun events to gain collective effort and enjoy the process.

Most importantly, enjoy your gardening. Failures are part of the experience. For instance, my sweet corn was a disaster this year, but that's okay—it only cost a few seeds. Embrace imperfection, enjoy your space, and appreciate the wildlife in your garden.

**Learn more**

Learn more ways to Green Your Neighbourhood: <https://wildlifegardenproject.com/green-your-neighbourhood/>

To find out more about the topics in this document and much, much more, visit the Wildlife Trust’s Nextdoor Nature Hub: <https://nextdoornaturehub.org.uk/>

**About Green Your Neighbourhood**

With thanks to National Lottery players, we have launched an exciting new campaign, Green Your Neighbourhood!

Green Your Neighbourhood will allow us to help communities across the UK to create or enhance their local green space, and is being made possible thanks to a grant of £10,000 from [The National Lottery Heritage Fund](https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/).

The Wildlife Garden Project has worked alongside [Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust](https://www.nottinghamshirewildlife.org/)to film community groups involved in[Nextdoor Nature Nottingham](https://www.nottinghamshirewildlife.org/nextdoor-nature), the Trust’s movement for nature, to launch a series of films and a national campaign. Our mission is to make it easy for people like you to take ownership of your local green space and take action that will benefit your local area, your community and wildlife.