



## ‘Growing With Nature’

Throughout the Grow Cook and Eat project we have transformed a range of different spaces for food growing and wildlife for example the community allotment, creating growing spaces in schools and also community housing greens. As soon as you get your hands in the soil to grow your own veg, it becomes immediately obvious that the food we grow is intimately connected with the living world. From all the minibeasts that maintain soil health and structure, to the bees, butterflies and hoverflies that pollinate tomatoes, beans and peas or the ladybird larvae we've seen eating the aphids on the pea shoots – we must look after the life we share the planet with in order to feed ourselves. That's why it's really important to leave wild margins and allow pollinator friendly plants to flower. If you look after nature, it will return the favour by looking after your crops. The more habitat you create, and insects you allow to thrive in your wild margins, the more birds, bats, hedgehogs and ladybirds there will be to clear up the pests coming for your vegetables, eliminating the need for pesticides. It's a potent reminder that we are not separate from nature, but in fact very much part of the ecological network.

It's hard to imagine that at the beginning of the project the community allotment plot that was donated to us was a six foot high 32 metre long mass of brambles and rubbish. Two and a half years later, it's been transformed into a productive, no-dig food-growing space full of wildlife. With help from the community we've added a small pond that's now teeming with newts and dragonfly larvae, and over time, the plot has welcomed all sorts of birds, bees, moths, caterpillars, and other wild visitors whilst also growing a steady supply of fruit and veg. The space has also provided a place for people to come and enjoy being outdoors, connecting with their food and nature.



Here are five simple, effective ways to boost wildlife in your outdoor space, whilst also enhancing food production:

### **1. Let some herbs flower**

Planting herbs in your garden or in a window box is a very rewarding activity, there's nothing like chucking a few fresh thyme leaves into your pasta or making a fresh mint tea. However, towards the end of the summer season you can let your herbs 'bolt' and go to flower by not removing the flower heads. The bees, hoverflies and butterflies will be thanking you. You may also get some seeds you can save for the following year.

### **2. Dedicate a small patch to go a bit wild**

Tall grasses, native wildflowers (like oxeye daisy or red campion), or just an undisturbed log pile. These areas support beneficial insects, frogs, and even hedgehogs, who help keep pests like slugs in check, or ladybirds who will eat your aphids.

### **3. Ditch the pesticides**

Many common garden pesticides harm pollinators and other helpful bugs. Instead, encourage natural predators (like ladybirds and birds) and try organic methods such as beer traps for slugs, garlic sprays, or companion planting (like nasturtiums to attract aphids away from crops).

### **4. Add a pond/water source**

Ponds are the best thing you can do for wildlife as they support a huge range of life from microorganisms through newts to larger animals and birds that will drink and bathe in the pond. It doesn't have to be big! A small pond, birdbath, or even a shallow dish with stones can be a lifeline for birds, bees, and amphibians – especially in dry spells. Keep it topped up with rainwater and keep clean.

### **5. Grow with a mix of plants and structures**

Blend food growing with wildflowers, fruit trees and flowering shrubs like hawthorn, honeysuckle, or dog rose. These plants offer food, shelter and pollen throughout the seasons. Also make use of vertical space, green screening fences or walls with plants such as hops or honeysuckle growing up a support. This adds multiple layers providing food and shelter for everything from bees to birds, and boosts pollination across the garden.

Sometimes I've taken a moment to pause and observe the pond we dug, the wildflowers we planted, and the multitude of life that they've supported going about their business, and I feel an overwhelming sense of satisfaction that we have given nature a home. All these creatures that simply wouldn't exist if we didn't create some space for them. Creating a small oasis of life can really help combat the day-to-day doom and gloom we hear on the news, and provide a sense of positive hope and agency that I think is really valuable.



**Eric Swithinbank - Community Ecologist**

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