

Ponsanooth Community Wildlife Garden Guide for Volunteers

**Everything you need to
know to maintain your
healthy wildlife garden.**



**Funded by
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Introduction

Wildlife gardening is a great way to get outside all year round and connect with nature. It's good for your mental and physical health. And the great thing about wildlife gardening is it's easy! Sort of. It's much easier than traditional gardening at least because the main objective is to leave space for nature to do its thing.

This takes a different approach and mindset.

The first thing to get over is the idea of a 'tidy' garden. That doesn't mean leaving tools all over the place but allowing nature time and space by letting the grass grow, leaving seed heads on flowers and shrubs and stopping thinking of plants or flowers that grow on their own accord as 'weeds'.

There's no such thing as a weed in a wildlife garden just a plant in the wrong place!

That doesn't mean we're leaving the garden to its own devices entirely, with careful management throughout the year, the garden should be able to do the rest and support an abundance of wildlife above and below ground.

Volunteers are needed to keep pathways clear, manage invasive species and dominating plants such as bramble and bindweed, prune trees and shrubs, and maintain the meadow throughout the year.



Created by Kernow Conservation CIC.
Words and photos by Joe Marshall unless
otherwise stated.



Volunteers digging brambles in
spring 2024

Welcome to the Ponsanooth Community Wildlife Garden



The Community Garden has been established with four zones each bringing a unique character and its own set of maintenance needs to the garden.

The orchard and woodland areas will need a relatively light touch throughout the year to ensure pathways are clear and no invasive or dominating plants such as bramble and bindweed are taking over.

The pond plays a vital role in supporting wildlife in the garden and will need very little maintenance other than to ensure that it isn't been dominated by invasive plants such as duckweed.

The wildflower meadow will take a few years to establish and year-round maintenance to ensure it isn't taken over by brambles.

Maintenance jobs can be divided between the seasons with different times of the year requiring different tasks.

Spring

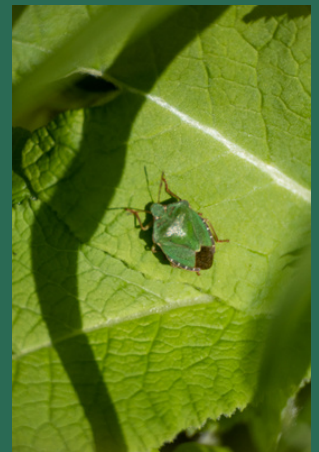
Spring is when everything comes back to life in the garden. The grass will quickly grow high and new shoots and seedlings will sprout all over the place. Buds will turn to leaves on the trees, songbirds will be gathering material for their nests and early butterflies will start to flutter around.

In the pond, newts and other amphibians will appear and dragonfly nymphs and other invertebrates will take residence above and below the surface.

In the orchard and hedgerows, blossom will appear attracting solitary bees as they come out of hibernation.

This is an important time for volunteers to make sure access to the garden and pathways are kept clear and any invasive plants are identified and removed before they have a chance to take over.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed by how quickly everything grows in spring, but don't panic! It's all part of the cycle.



Jobs to do in spring:

- **Keep pathways clear of grass, weeds and overhanging plants**
- **Keep the benches clear of grass and plants and make sure they're accessible from the main path**
- **Keep the wildflower meadow clear of brambles, nettles and dock**
- **Watch out for and remove invasive plant species**
- **Keep the bramble under control – cut back and dig out!**

Summer

Summer is the time to enjoy the garden and the benefits of all the hard work done throughout the year. The garden and all the wildlife visiting and living in it are in full swing. Fruits are growing on trees and shrubs and seedheads will be fit to burst. The garden should be alive with the buzzing of insects and the calls of birds.

The garden may look 'overgrown' or 'messy' to some, but nature in its essence is overgrown and messy so a thriving wildlife garden will be full of life this time of year.

Volunteers must keep a routine of maintaining access to the garden by clearing pathways and making sure the benches are clear of plants and grasses. Paths to the benches will also need regular strimming.

Bindweed may become a problem, so help any plants and trees being strangled by it by removing it from them regularly. You'll never get rid of all of it so don't worry just give trees, plants and shrubs some breathing space from it.

In late summer the wildflower meadow will need one cut and clear once the seed has dropped and/or been collected.



Jobs to do in summer:

- Keep pathways clear of grass, weeds and overhanging plants
- Keep the benches clear of grass and plants and make sure they're accessible from the main path
- Keep the edges of the patch trimmed back
- Rescue anything overshadowed by grass or strangled by bindweed
- Collect seeds and cut the meadow in late summer/early autumn.

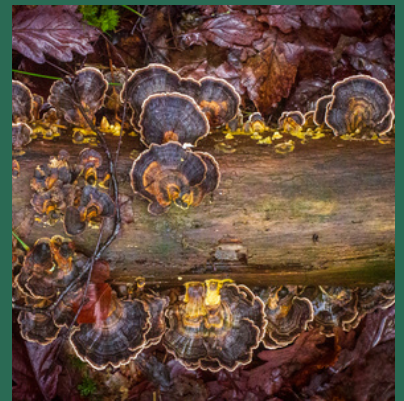
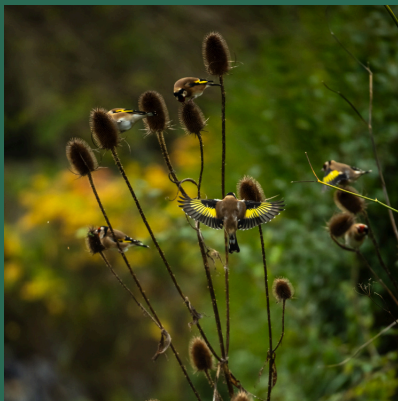
Autumn

Autumn is when the growing season winds down to a halt and wildlife activity in the garden will slow down too. But for wildlife gardeners, autumn is the time to start getting back to work, with areas of the garden needing special attention.

Lavender is one of the few plants in the garden that require deadheading each year to ensure they grow back stronger next year. Other seed heads and fruits should be left in situ as they feed birds all winter.

The meadow must be kept clear of leaf litter so regular light raking to remove dead leaves is essential to its success. Any leaf litter that rots down will feed the grass and make it difficult for wildflowers to establish.

Hedge plants will need pruning to stop them from growing over the fence to the preschool and now that most of the creatures that took summer residence in the pond will have vacated, any out-of-control pond plants can be removed.



Jobs to do in autumn:

- Keep pathways clear of grass, weeds and overhanging plants
- Deadhead the lavender
- Check the pond for overgrown duckweed etc and remove 2/3 if necessary
- Prune the hedge plants by the preschool fence and make sure no thorny plants are growing through to the other side
- Leave seed heads, blackberries and any fruit that falls in situ – they will help attract and sustain wildlife throughout the coming winter!

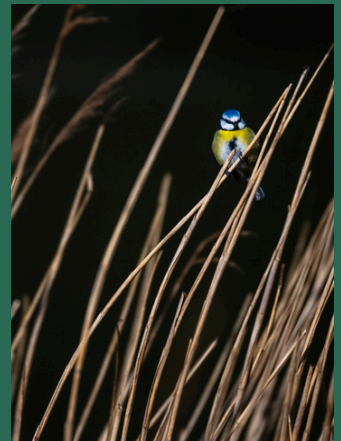
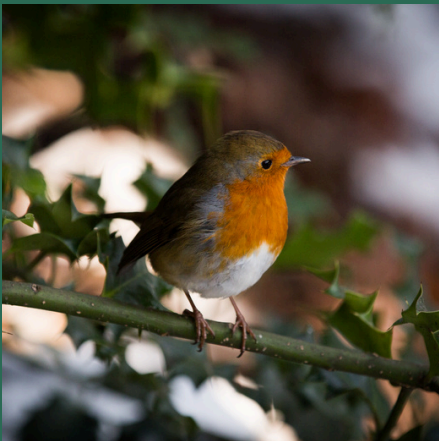
Winter

We have planted winter-flowering shrubs such as witch hazel and wintersweet, while the seed heads and fruits left in place will attract birds all winter and provide safe haven for insects. So although quiet, the garden will still be alive with goldfinches and other visitors.

Winter is still the best time of year to make wholesale changes in a wildlife garden without disturbing the established wildlife.

Trees and shrubs can be pruned back and any waste can be fed into the dead hedge, while any areas that became overgrown by brambles or bindweed can be cut back.

Just remember to leave seed heads on plants like teasels and evening flowering primrose as they will provide food for birds all through the cold months.



Jobs to do in winter:

- **Keep pathways clear of grass, weeds and overhanging plants**
- **Re-woodchip the paths if necessary**
- **Prune trees and shrubs**
- **Plant new trees and shrubs (if there is space)**
- **Build up the dead hedge border with tree prunings and other waste**
- **Keep the meadow clear of brambles, nettles, dock and leaf litter**
- **Remove brambles by digging out by the roots**
- **Strim the meadow twice before mid-March (this is essential to the success of the meadow).**

Invasive plants

Cornwall is not immune to invasive, non-native plant species and once established in the garden some can cause a real problem. For example, large numbers of orange flowering crocosmia (a.k.a. Montbretia) can look pretty in the summer. Still, these highly invasive plants will crowd out everything else and harm biodiversity. The same goes for three-cornered leek (a.k.a. Stinking onion), found all over Cornwall it will crowd out other plants.

There are many non-native invasive plants around but in Cornish gardens, the main ones to keep an eye out for are:

***Allium triquetrum* -**

Three cornered leek (a.k.a. stinking onion)

This member of the onion family originates from the Mediterranean comes up in early spring and naturally spreads via insects. Its pretty flowers are reminiscent of bluebells or snowdrops but are distinctive by the green stripes on its petals and the triangular shape of its leaves and stem - giving its common name of 'three-cornered leek.' If found in the garden, remove the entire plant including the bulb. They pull quite easily in bunches and are entirely edible - they make great pesto!



Three cornered leek

***Crocasmia* - montbretia**

This flame-flowered native of the grasslands of southern and eastern Africa has made itself at home in Cornish hedgerows, meadows and just about anywhere else it can find. Once established it grows vigorously from its underground corms (similar to bulbs) which fill the soil. It's particularly bad for biodiversity despite being sold everywhere. But they do pull up in bunches quite easily once they mature. If any appear in the garden, pull in late spring when a bit easier but make sure to remove the corms below the soil.



Crocasmia Photo: Canva

***Reynoutria japonica* - Japanese knotweed**

The scourge of homeowners, Japanese knotweed has deep rhizomes and root systems that can cause property damage. Its bamboo-like shoots can be seen coming up in spring. It has large spade-like leaves and cream flowers that bloom in late summer. There is a patch of knotweed in the far corner of the garden near the preschool which is being managed by a contractor, but if any more appears please inform the parish council.



Japanese Knotweed
Photo: Canva

Native invasives to manage: brambles, bindweeds, nettles and dock

Bindweeds provide food for some beetles and the caterpillars of many moths, including convolvulus hawk-moth, elephant hawk-moth and rosy wave moth. Brambles support birds, such as bullfinches, that eat dried blackberries during the winter. However, if left alone bindweeds can cause problems by strangling other plants and smothering whole areas, while bramble will soon take over.

Manage bindweed by pulling it out in spring and then rescuing anything it strangles in summer, particularly in the orchard. Dig bramble by the root from winter onwards but leave any fruit for the birds in late summer. Dock and nettles should be removed from the wildflower meadow whenever they come up. Nettles can be left elsewhere as they're great for many caterpillars and other wildlife.



Bindweed. Photo: Canva

Wildflower Meadow

Once established and with the right maintenance, the wildflower meadow should provide an abundant and beautiful source for pollinators all through the summer.

But the meadow will take time to establish, and a routine of maintenance throughout the year must be kept to achieve that. In the first few seasons, it may not look like much as many perennial wildflowers take time to establish properly so some expectation management is necessary!

The soil and grass in the meadow mustn't be fed. That means regularly removing leaf litter and cutting and clearing the area several times a year. Wildflower meadows are managed environments and this cut-and-clear method mimics the grazing that would normally be done by livestock and other animals.

All the seeds sown on the meadow have been hand-collected locally or donated by a local nursery. We have sown a lowland meadow mix of oxeye daisy, common knapweed, field scabious, yarrow, cowslip and yellow rattle. While primroses and others have been planted.

In late summer, seeds can be hand-collected and re-sown for the next year before cutting back. Waste can be either added to the dead hedge or the compost site.



Jobs to do in the meadow

- Strim the meadow twice before mid-March and clear the waste to give the wildflower seedlings a chance against the grass
- Collect seeds in late summer (optional)
- Cut and clear again in late summer/early autumn once the seed has dropped
- Keep the area clear of nettles, brambles and dock all -year-round.

Pond

A healthy pond is an essential part of any wildlife garden. Not only a unique habitat providing space for creatures to live but a pond will attract and sustain a host of wildlife visiting the garden.

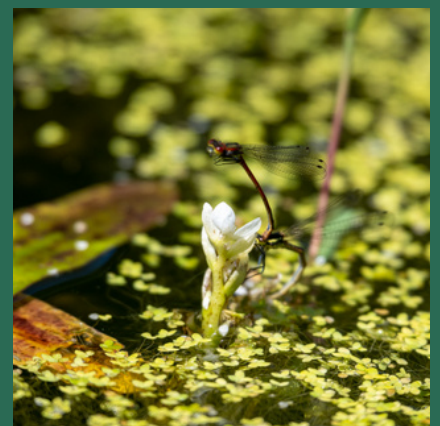
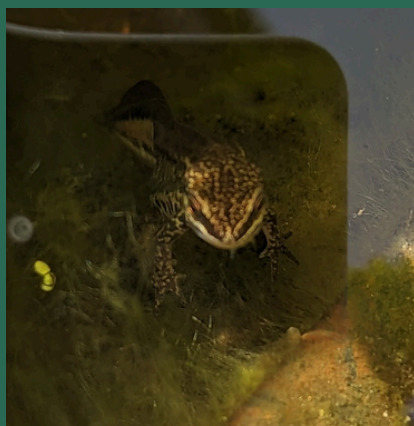
Pond plants are vital to oxygenating the water and keeping the pond healthy and clean while providing shade and food for pond-dwelling life. In spring, newts will move in to mate and spend several months in the pond before moving into the hedgerows in the height of summer while dragonfly nymphs will live below the surface. Snails will feed on the algae and help manage plant life.

Birds and mammals large and small will visit the garden to use the pond as a water source and any resident mammals will rely on it for survival.

Left to its own devices the pond should take very little management. But will need checking each year to ensure that no invasive plants such as duckweed have taken over. In times of drought, check the water levels and if it drops too low, top it up with water from the water butt and not with tap water.

It's important not to disturb the wildlife living in the pond so do not attempt to remove any plants until autumn when most creatures living it will have moved on.

A good rule of thumb is that if more than 2/3 of the pond is covered in weeds, reduce it to 1/3 in autumn. Always leave any plants removed from the pond by the edge for 24 hours so anything living in it can go back into the water.



Food plants for wildlife

Around the garden, we have planted a range of trees, shrubs and flowers that are food plants for native wildlife. Alder buckthorn will attract and feed brimstone butterflies, for example. Wintersweet and witch hazel are winter flowering shrubs which will feed non-hibernating bees and other invertebrates throughout the winter. Bees and other pollinators love lavender, in summer the scented flowers will be a buzz of activity.

Teasels, evening flowering primrose and thistles will feed pollinators in the summer and the seed heads will feed many birds in the winter so make sure to leave them in place!

Many plants which are seen as 'weeds' or pests by many gardeners play a vital role in feeding many moths, butterflies, caterpillars and other wildlife. Nettles are relied on by small tortoiseshells, peacocks and red admiral caterpillars, while painted ladies and commas will also eat the plant.

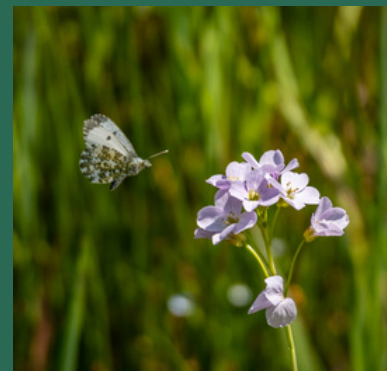
Ragwort gets a bad reputation due to its carcinogenic seeds, but are only a problem when they grow in hay fields and get put into animal feed (horses and other animals know to avoid it otherwise). But ragwort is a wildflower that supports 200 invertebrates, including the day-flying cinnabar moth. You may want to remove the seed heads once ragwort as gone over as it will spread but the flowers are best left in place.



Ragwort & Cinnabar Moth



Lavender & Bee



Orange tip butterfly



Nettles & Caterpillars



Thistles



Brimstone Butterfly