Habitat Action Plan
Private Gardens

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"A poor widow in her weeds
Sowed her garden with wild flower seeds…
And now all summer she sits and sews

Where willow herb, comfrey, bugloss blows,
Teasel and tansy, meadowsweet,
Campion, toadflax, and rough hawksbit…"
(Walter de la Mare)

1. Aims

- To highlight and protect the overall resource for wildlife provided by private gardens in London.
- To improve individual private gardens as habitat for a range of local wildlife.

2. Introduction

For the purposes of this action plan, private gardens are defined as the private open space surrounding residential dwellings where the householders have sole responsibility for management.

Private gardens form an important part of London's landscape. For many people these are the places where they have most frequent contact with nature.

They are probably the most varied areas of green space in the Capital, ranging in size from tiny 'pocket handkerchiefs' in the central London boroughs, to the elaborate landscaped parkland of London's mansions. Garden ponds support amphibians and dragonflies. Dense undergrowth provides good breeding sites for small birds, many of which have suffered significant declines in the countryside. Hedgehogs, bats, butterflies, stag beetles and other invertebrates are frequently associated with this habitat. Larger gardens and gardens adjoining areas of semi-natural habitat may help support grass snakes, badgers, foxes and many birds, including woodpeckers.

3. Current Status

The rapid growth of suburban London last century resulted in large areas of low-density housing enclosing groups of individual gardens. Together these add up to substantial areas of open land. As undeveloped land has become scarcer in the city, gardens have come under pressure for development.

An analysis of aerial photographs undertaken in 1981 found that private gardens comprised approximately 20% of Greater London, equivalent to 30,000 hectares. The mosaic of gardens across the capital, acts as an ‘urban nature reserve’, widely recognised as providing valuable habitat for a significant number of common animals.

4. Specific Factors Affecting the Habitat

4.1 Design and management

Design and approach to management has a profound effect on the wildlife associated with gardens. A garden that consists largely of lawn and hard surfacing, or is constantly replenished in a bedding scheme style, will support far fewer species. Unfortunately the formally managed garden is still a strongly upheld ideal and the entrenched attitudes of many gardeners are difficult, yet not impossible, to influence.

Research and experience have both shown that gardens managed to provide a range of habitat features will attract and sustain more wild plants and animals. Examples include dense shrubberies, climbers, long grass, bird feeders, dead wood and a garden pond.

4.2 Planting

The plants used in a garden can have a large impact on the wildlife supported by it, but perhaps not to the extent anticipated by gardeners who are unwilling to change their basic approach to the overall appearance of their garden.

Some plants are renowned for improving a garden’s attractiveness for wildlife. For example, ivy is a seasonally important source of nectar and berries, provides nesting and roosting habitats for birds, and is the caterpillar food plant of the holly blue butterfly. *Pyracantha*, hawthorn and female holly trees provide autumn berries and nesting sites for thrushes and blackbirds, if allowed to grow to a sufficient height.

Some plants have comparatively little value for wildlife, for example double-flowered varieties which produce no nectar or pollen. On the other hand, some plants are less susceptible to pests and diseases and less likely to encourage the use of pesticides.

A further concern is the damage caused by some garden plants when they are dumped or escape into natural areas. Examples include rampant colonizers such as parrot’s

feather, which causes severe problems by choking waterways and ponds, and the Spanish bluebell which can hybridize with our native bluebell.

4.3 Pesticide use

Excessive use of pesticides has been cited as one of the potential causes of the decline of certain species, especially birds and hedgehogs. Concern for the use of pesticides is based around three issues:

- They directly reduce food availability such as insects and snails, which are eaten by song thrushes and many other animals.
- They are often indiscriminate in their affects, killing beneficial insects such as a ladybirds along with the target 'infestation'.
- Pesticides can sometimes enter the food chain, with disastrous results. For example, ants treated with ant-killer have been known to poison nestling green woodpeckers.
- Organic gardening is becoming more popular. However, ignorance and the desire for 'quick fix' solutions still pervade the choice of pest control methods. There is clearly a need for greater awareness in this area.

4.4 Scale

The size of a garden and the extent to which it is connected with adjacent open land is a major factor influencing the wildlife that will use it. However all gardens are valuable.

4.5 Planning controls

New targets for housing, reflecting social, economic and demographic changes, have fuelled the demand for suburban infill or backland development. This has resulted in a loss of garden habitat. However, a number of boroughs have planning policies in place to discourage this.

Since the second half of the twentieth centaury, people have aimed for the ideal of a house with its own garden. However, in recent years there has been a reduction in the size of gardens provided in new developments.

4.6 Wider factors

Gardeners are significant consumers of resources. The horticultural industry often sources unsustainable products such as plants dug up from the wild, peat, tropical hardwoods and natural stone, collected from threatened habitats around the world. The transport of goods and the use of resources in the manufacture of garden products are issues for gardeners to be aware of in reducing their ecological footprint. Garden centres and growers clearly have a significant role to play in marketing appropriate plants and products.

People sometimes presume that the best way to get wildlife into a garden is to take it from the wild. Plants and animals are still being removed from the countryside, and sometimes even from nature reserves.

5. Current Action

5.1 Legal status

Private gardens are seldom protected from development purely from a biodiversity perspective, and very few are included in Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation. However, biodiversity is often a factor included in planning policies to protect garden land.

Conservation Area status and Tree Preservation Orders give some protection to tree cover.

Some animals using gardens are protected to various degrees by wildlife legislation, notably bats, badger slow-worm, great crested newt, common lizard and grass snake,

5.2 Mechanisms Targeting the Habitat

These current actions are ongoing. They need to be supported and continued in addition to the new action listed under Section 7.

5.2.1 Promotion of wildlife gardening

Wildlife gardening is gaining acceptance and understanding, particularly as a result of promotion by the media. There has been a move towards more sustainable practices and products. The broad popular appeal of wildlife gardening has led to various articles, books and programmes including the BBC's popular 'Charlie's Wildlife Gardens' series.

A number of demonstration gardens have been established recently to inspire and inform the public. These are found, for example, at the Natural History Museum, the London Wildlife Trust's Centre for Wildlife Gardening, London Zoo, the London Wetland Centre, and in various city farms and community gardens. Kew Gardens also has several areas managed to attract wildlife. Wildlife gardens at flower shows in London are popular with the public and have won recognition from judges, while recent promotion of wildlife gardening by the Royal Horticultural Society has offered further credibility.

Printed information to assist would be wildlife gardeners have been produced by various organizations, including Gardening Which?, the Royal Horticultural Society, and Froglife. Several London boroughs have produced wildlife gardening information for local residents, such as Redbridge, Bromley and Croydon. The London Wildlife Trust has produced a comprehensive pack on wildlife gardening for Londoners, with support from the London Biodiversity Partnership.

Training programmes, talks and practical events have been provided by groups including BTCV, the London Wildlife Trust, the Natural History Museum, the Horniman Museum and the Worker's Education Association. As many mainstream horticultural courses include units on ecology and organic gardening, growing numbers of grounds people and landscapers are qualifying with an understanding of wildlife gardens. To assist gardeners in choosing appropriate plants for their region, Flora for Fauna have produced a database, selectable by postcode

(see www.nhm.ac.uk/science/projects/fff/index.htm)

Competitions, family events, free-tree schemes and many other projects have raised the profile of gardens as places for wildlife. An extremely successful one-day conference for gardeners interested in wildlife was organised by the steering group for this Action Plan at the Natural History Museum in 2003.

5.2.2 Survey and monitoring

A number of public surveys have invited gardeners to send in their records of easily recognised species. Six thousand records of stag beetle sightings were recorded in surveys carried out by the London Wildlife Trust, London Borough of Bromley and the People's Trust for Endangered Species, between the years 1999 and 2000. The London Wildlife Trust's 'Wildlife in Gardens' survey attracted 4400 responses and was further developed by various local authorities and borough biodiversity partnerships. Detailed surveys of garden ponds have been carried out in Merton, Ealing, Croydon and Southwark.

The London Ecology Unit and London Borough of Sutton undertook a detailed study of birds in suburban gardens, demonstrating clearly that the diversity of bird species increases with garden size.

An ongoing survey of biodiversity is being undertaken in the Wildlife Garden at the Natural History Museum. Findings to date clearly demonstrate the value of even the most urbanised wildlife gardens for a wide range of invertebrates and birds. A detailed survey of the plants and animals of Buckingham Palace Gardens was carried out by the London Natural History Society between 1995 and1998, to follow earlier work undertaken in the early 1960s. This has resulted in a comprehensive list of the biodiversity that survives in central London.

On a national scale, the Garden Birdwatch survey is collated annually by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and currently has around 400 surveyors in London; an ongoing National Butterfly Survey is carried out by Butterfly Conservation; and the Garden Mammal Survey is carried out by the Mammal Society.

6. Flagship Species

These special animals are characteristic of private gardens in London.

Hedgehog	*Erinaceus europaeus*	Possibly one of the most popular species in the capital. Renowned for eating slugs. Absent from central London. Threats include road traffic, steep-sided ponds, and the consumption of slugs that are dying from slug pellets.
Common frog	*Rana temporaria*	Frogs can be found across London, and provide fascination to many gardeners. Their main requirements are sunny ponds for breeding, damp cover for hunting and undisturbed places for hibernation.
Dragonflies and damselflies	Odonata	The whirring wings of dragonflies and damselflies bring delight to all. They need medium to large sunny open ponds, without fish, which shelve gently and have appropriate marginal planting.
Wren	*Troglodytes troglodytes*	Found in shrubby corners of even the most central areas. Wrens prefer to hide from view but give themselves away with their explosive trilling song.
Blackbird	*Turdus merula*	Admired for its fine singing. Present throughout London wherever there are low dense shrubs and lawns.
Ladybirds	Coccinellidae	Loved by children and gardeners. Obvious threats include excessive pesticide use and destruction of hibernation sites.
Bumblebees	*Bombus* spp.	Present in most gardens, and particularly visible when visiting nectar- rich garden flowers.

Small Tortoiseshell butterfly	*Aglais urticae*	Relies on large sunny nettle patches for its caterpillars. The adult butterfly's particular garden favourites include ice plant, lavender, *Hebe*, field scabious and *Aubretia*.
Holly Blue butterfly	*Celastrina argiolus*	Notable particularly for having two generations with different caterpillar food plants, the flower buds and young leaves of holly and the flower buds of ivy.

7. Objectives, Actions and Targets

*Most of these actions are specific to this habitat. However, there are other, broader actions that apply generically to a number of habitats and species. These are located in a separate '*Generic Action*' section which should be read in conjunction with this document. There are generic actions for Site Management, Habitat Protection, Species Protection, Ecological Monitoring, Biological Records, Communications and Funding.*

Please note that the partners identified in the tables are those that have been involved in the process of forming the plan. It is not an exclusive list and new partners are both welcomed and needed. The leads identified are responsible for co-ordinating the actions – but are not necessarily implementers.

Objective 1 To protect the overall resource of private gardens in London by discouraging building on existing gardens.

Target: Publish model planning policy protecting gardens by 2006

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
1.1 Establish and publicise policy and criteria for protection of garden sites from built development	2006	GLA	LA

Objective 2 Support and encourage recording of biodiversity in gardens

Target: Compile baseline information on wildlife in gardens by 2005

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
2.1 Repeat London Wildlife Trust's 'Wildlife in Gardens' survey	2004 achieved	LWT/GIGL	LA
2.2 Carry out attitudinal surveys of garden centre users	2003 achieved	LWT	GW
2.3 Continue survey of home pesticide use and report on findings	2003 achieved	PAN	Working group
2.4 Increase the numbers of participants in the Garden Birdwatch survey to 1000.	2003 achieved	BTO	Working group
2.5 Compile and analyse survey information from surveys on species in gardens	2005	Working group	GLA
2.6 Establish and publicise a network of expertise for garden insect identification in 6 sites in London	2005	Working group	GW, NHM, RHS, LWT
2.7 Produce report on survey of garden centre users and species in gardens	2005	BOST/ LWT	Working group

Objective 3 Raise public awareness of wildlife gardening

Target: Increase interest in events and resources offered by partner organisations

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
3.1 Establish a Wildlife Gardens Working Group	2002 achieved	LWT	LA, LWT, Froglife, PAN, RBGK, NHM, GW, CPG, RHS, FCF&CG, GLA, Others
3.2 Promote demonstration wildlife gardens which are open to the public in London	2002 achieved	LWT	FCFCG, Working group
3.3 Produce a wildlife gardening guide for London's wildlife gardeners	2002 achieved	LWT/GLA	Working group
3.4 Support garden centres in marketing wildlife friendly products and providing advice	Annually	PAN	Working Group
3.5 Promote information on wildlife gardening talks and training throughout London.	2005	LWT	LBP
3.6 Develop a plan to hold a wildlife gardeners gathering	2004 achieved	Working Group	LWT, NHM
3.7 Organise workshops to raise profile of wildlife gardening criteria and categories in Borough in Bloom competitions	2006	GLA/LWT	LBP, LAs, Working group
3.8 Run wildlife gardening campaign	2005	LWT	Working group
3.9 Hold a second Wildlife Gardening Conference	2005	LWT/NHM	Working group
3.10 Investigate giving publicity on garden wildlife to commuters	2007	GLA/LWT	Working group

Relevant Action Plans

London Plans

Chalk Grassland, Reptiles; Churchyards and Cemeteries; Parks, Squares & Amenity Grassland; Bats; House Sparrow; Grey Heron; Stag Beetle; Mistletoe.

House Martin, Swift, Humble Bumble and Exotic Flora statements.

National Plans

Built Environment and Gardens; Long tongued Bumble Bee; Stag Beetle.

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Abbreviations

BTO - British Trust for Ornithology
BOST – Bankside Open Spaces Trust
CPG - Chelsea Physic Garden
FCF&CG - Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens
GIGL – Greenspace Information for Greater London
GLA - Greater London Authority
GW – Gardening Which?
LA - Local Authorities
LWT - London Wildlife Trust
PAN - Pesticides Action Network
RBGK - Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew
RHS - Royal Horticultural Society
NHM - Natural History Museum

Contact

The Lead for this habitat is the London Wildlife Trust.

Moya O'Hara
London Wildlife Trust
Centre for Wildlife Gardening
28 Marsden Road
London SE15 4EE

Tel 020 7252 9186
email lwtwildgarden@cix.co.uk
web www.wildlondon.org.uk