

A Wildlife Garden

Around 20 members of St John's visited George Harris' wildlife garden at Tollcross in central Edinburgh on Saturday 13 August...



I began to develop a wild garden as soon as we bought our present house, sixteen years ago. I had been inspired by a television series, presented by Chris Baines. The biggest event was the digging and filling of the pond, and within twenty four hours there was a frog sitting in it, seeking cool water away from the sun. Now the garden is more or less as I planned it, and there is nothing to do except keep hacking back the wilderness, chase away the cats and enjoy the flowers, birds and insects.



There are seven main areas. **The pond** now has breeding colonies of frogs, toads and newts, and all sorts of invertebrates, of whom my favourites are the caddis grubs, the leeches, the asellus and the beetles. It also contains plants of spectacular colour, including forget-me-nots and yellow iris. **The unmown grass** (hay meadow, if you like) is the most beautiful part of the garden in early summer, ablaze with buttercups. The long grass is a haven for young amphibians, and houses all sorts of insects. Other flower species seem to be slowly establishing themselves. **The hedge** contains hazel, beech, hawthorn, ash, oak, rowan, raspberries, brambles, sycamore, elder and holly. Half of these I introduced; the other half just turned up. There is no greater pleasure than to be able, every day, to see all the bud-shapes, leaf-shapes and berries of such a range of trees in their seasonal form; the spring buds, coated in frost, are especially lovely. Round the back the clump of lords-and-ladies has grown from a single plant to a veritable colony. **The wildflower annual bed** is cheap and cheerful colour, from a packet of seeds, appreciated by the insects and lasting well into autumn. **The pond edge**, of perennials, grows well over six

feet high every year, to be hacked back to ground level in winter, and provides more late summer colour with vetch and meadow sweet, birds foot trefoil and hemp agrimony. The seeds are popular with birds in winter. The thicket that encases the garage is supposed to provide nesting space for birds. The ivy, sweet briar and pile of brushwood are tempting to wrens and robins, and there have been some successes, despite the cats. But the ivy berries and rose-hips are also excellent bird food. **The verges** might look to a conventional gardener like the unkempt weeds of an idle fellow. It is true that, apart from a few carefully introduced treasures such as the cowslips and foxgloves most of the plants are self-seeded: the exquisite beauty of dandelion clocks, the sky blue alkanet, the subtle russets of mature dock-heads and plantains, the yellow Welsh poppies, the bright green ferns and the sparkling white feverfew.



It does all take management, pruning and mowing, and all but a few of the hogweeds, nettles and willowherbs are rooted out; but sitting amongst "all this juice and all this joy" in dappled shade, watching the bumble bees and blue tits, I would not exchange my "weeds" for any herbacious border. (As a matter of fact there are some more conventional beds nearer the house.) Ecologists tell me that all this may be good for the planet; all I selfishly know is that it is good for me.

