



Heaven on earth

> Garden field FACTFILE

Size: three vegetable beds, each 7x5m (23x17ft); orchard of 0.25 acres

Soil type: free-draining, clay-loam

Aspect: southwest facing, exposed slope

Garden age: six years

Location: Matlock, Derbyshire

Key features: heritage apple trees, wildlife pond, wildflower meadow

Garden owners: Penny and Richard Bunting

succulent florets we picked the following spring were the best veg we'd ever tasted.

Little Green Space

Visitors, watching us pulling up an acre of ragwort by hand, laughed. 'Get some Roundup!' they advised. 'Spray it! You'll never get rid of the weeds like that!' Yet one thing we were becoming more and more certain of was that we wanted to manage the land in an environmentally friendly and sustainable way. A friend, a ranger for the Peak District National Park, had already identified 14 different species of wildflower on the land, including clover, ox-eye daisies and the relatively rare great burnet. There was a badger sett in one of the fields and tawny owls nesting in a huge, ancient ash tree near the house.

So our minds were made up: we would produce our own organic fruit and vegetables and keep free range hens for eggs, alongside restoring and creating as many wildlife habitats

Well, to begin with we didn't really know. We were still recovering from that moment at the auction when we had suddenly spent a small fortune! I knew, however, that I wanted a kitchen garden, so the first thing we did was to start digging an area to grow vegetables. This was no easy task. The grassland was badly neglected and overrun with bramble, ragwort and nettles.

At first we only managed to clear a few square metres. But it was enough space to grow some purple sprouting broccoli – and those



Ragwort and bramble were cleared to create the vegetable garden

as possible. Five years later we have three large vegetable beds, a fruit garden and orchard, and are almost self-sufficient in fruit, veg and eggs.

We were also inspired to help others to live sustainably and improve biodiversity regardless of their available space. And so Little Green Space (www.littlegreenspace.org.uk) was born – a non-profit environmental project working with schools, individuals and community groups to create wildlife- and people-friendly spaces.

Attracting wildlife

Growing organically, of course, means no chemicals. That means no insecticides, no weedkiller and no artificial fertilisers. With seven acres to manage we need all the help we can get, which is where biodiversity fits in. We do all we can to encourage wildlife onto our plot. We have built a pond, planted a bee and butterfly garden packed with nectar-rich shrubs and perennials, and birdfeeders hang from every available branch.

The birds that visit the feeders will gobble up garden pests, as will the frogs and toads that breed in

Working hand in hand with wildlife reaps many rewards. Penny Bunting explains how she created her own slice of paradise

When people hear the word 'biodiversity' they often conjure up images of rainforests, coral reefs or endangered species such as

polar bears or giant pandas. But biodiversity isn't something that only exists in far-flung, exotic locations. It's all around us – and kitchen gardeners are in a strong position to help. In fact, simply by maintaining an allotment, vegetable garden or fruit trees we are already contributing to the protection of biodiversity.

We're a third of the way through the United Nations Decade on Biodiversity (2011-2020), a celebration of the enormous variety of plants, animals, microorganisms and ecosystems that exists on earth. What's really fantastic is that the interaction between many of these plants and animals often works in the kitchen gardener's favour.

Ground swell

A few years ago, we were struggling to maintain any sort of biodiversity on our patch. The Peak District cottage where we've lived for 15 years only had a tiny patio garden. We managed to grow a few peas, tomatoes and herbs in containers, but I really longed for a proper vegetable garden. Then a strip of farmland adjoining our cottage came up for sale. We bid at the auction, the hammer came down and the land was ours. In the space of a couple of minutes our growing space had swollen from seven square metres of patio to seven acres of grassland. 'What are you going to do with it?' we were asked by friends and family.



Charity Little Green Space works with children to create wildlife-friendly spaces, such as this bug hotel created by pupils at Matlock Bath Holy Trinity School

Biodiversity isn't something that only exists in far-flung, exotic locations

Above: Wildflowers thrive in this Peak District meadow

Rosie, one of the free range hens



Blue tits gobble up aphids and robins adore caterpillars

the pond. Bees and bumblebees will be attracted into the garden by the bright blooms of the nectar-rich border and will then go on to pollinate our raspberries, strawberries, beans and apples. Hoverflies will Hoover up aphids on the greenhouse tomatoes. The hedgehogs living in the woodpile will feast on slugs and snails. They are all working hard to help us – they just don't know it!

One area where kitchen gardening and biodiversity work particularly well together is in the orchard. Fruit trees are an important habitat for many creatures including woodpeckers, redstarts and bats, while bees, bumblebees and hoverflies love the nectar provided by apple blossom.

Orchards are a rapidly-disappearing feature of the British landscape, so planting 40 fruit trees – a mix of apple, pear, plum, damson and cherry – gave us a happy glow.



Local beekeepers keep bees on the smallholding

A couple of beehives, belonging to local members of the British Beekeeping Association, are sited nearby, ensuring that all our fruit gets pollinated.

More than 40 fruit trees have been planted in the now-thriving orchard

been known to wipe out two rows of cabbages in just a couple of hours.

Problems can be solved though. Netting will keep birds off brassicas and butterflies off Brussels

sprouts. Marigolds can be planted to attract wasps and hoverflies, which in turn will then eat cabbage white caterpillars.

Every spring I see a pair of beautiful bullfinches pecking about on our old apple tree. They're pinching the fruit buds, and I suppose that should make me cross. But every year that same tree gives us plenty of apples and as well as eating the buds, the bullfinches will almost certainly have been eating any unwelcome bugs.

Along with the bees, frogs, hedgehogs and hoverflies that visit our plot, the bullfinches are helping us to produce bumper crops.

There'll be plenty to go around come autumn and the least we can do is share a little of the harvest. 🍏



Apple blossom provides nectar for bumblebees

★ Penny Bunting is a writer and smallholder living in the Peak District. She runs award-winning environmental project Little Green Space (www.littlegreenspace.org.uk). Follow her on Twitter @LGSspace.

Problems solved

It hasn't all been plain sailing as kitchen gardening and wildlife gardening don't always go hand in hand. Encouraging wildlife into the vegetable garden

sometimes has disadvantages.

While I love to see butterflies such as peacocks and painted ladies flitting around, I could do without cabbage whites – last year their caterpillars destroyed an entire Brussels sprouts crop.

Most birds are very welcome in the garden. Blue tits gobble up aphids and robins adore caterpillars. Visiting birds excrete valuable nitrates that enrich the soil. And I'm sure I'm not the only kitchen gardener who enjoys the sight of a thrush smashing a lettuce-munching snail against a rock! I'm not so keen on the sight of pigeons pecking at the brassicas. They have

The vegetable beds lie immediately next to the meadow



10 steps to improve biodiversity



1 Feed the birds: A few feeders in your garden will attract a variety of different birds. Try, for example, peanuts for blue tits and nyger seed for finches.

2 Grow nectar-rich plants: Butterflies and bees love buddleia, sedums, lavender, thyme and scabious. These plants are easy to grow, need little maintenance and will attract pollinating insects to your fruit and vegetables.

3 Build a pond: This is one of the best things you can do to attract wildlife. Frogs, toads, newts, dragonflies and damselflies will take up residence within a few months of a pond appearing, and bats, birds and hedgehogs will also visit. As an added bonus frogs and toads keep garden pests like slugs under control.

4 Make a log pile: This one's easy. Get hold of some logs, pile them up in a corner and leave alone. Little creatures will move in. Log piles are especially

good for invertebrates like ladybirds, and ladybird larvae love to eat aphids.

5 Put up a nesting box: Within 10 years a nesting box can provide shelter for 100 baby blue tits. Or, at the other end of the scale, if you have the space, how about a barn owl box?

6 Leave an area of your lawn uncut: 1.5 square metres of uncut grass can provide enough oxygen for one adult for one year and will attract all kinds of invertebrates. And it doesn't take so long to mow the grass. It's a no-brainer!

7 Plant a hedge: Hedges are so good for wildlife. They provide pathways and shelter for small mammals, and thrushes, dunnocks and finches will use the hedgerow for nesting. Berries provide food in the winter. Hawthorn, buckthorn and holly are all good hedging plants. Or create an edible hedgerow for humans, with crab apple, hazel and damson.

8 Start a compost heap: Most kitchen gardeners already do this. However, compost heaps aren't just great for your vegetable garden – insects love them, and if you make or buy an open, wooden container, birds and toads can get to the insects.

9 Leave a 'messy' area: Find a corner. Put in some branches or twigs and maybe a pile of leaves. Leave it alone. Let the nettles grow. Hedgehogs love this sort of environment and hate to be disturbed.

10 Plant a tree: Big trees: oak, beech, ash. Small trees: holly, hawthorn, rowan. Trees that give you food: apple, plum, pear. All are fantastic for wildlife!

