

How to have a wildlife friendly garden

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Many of our native birds and animals, including rare and endangered species, are to be found on privately owned land - and they rely on this land for their food, shelter and survival. Moreover, areas of vegetation are needed as green corridors to link the bushland areas so that the wildlife can move safely between these areas.

Therefore, what you do as a householder can affect the wildlife and plants in your area – and whether our native birds and animals survive can be up to you.

You can create an environmentally friendly garden in your yard. No matter how small or urban an area, your garden can help by acting as a part of a green corridor for the wildlife, and provide a refuge for some of our native plants and wildlife. This can add song and colour to your garden while also helping to pollinate plants and to control insect pests.

Planning a wildlife friendly garden

A complex balance exists in our bushland between the wildlife, plants, leaf litter and soil – all have a function in the bushland ecosystem. Once there would have been layers of vegetation on your block and this would have supported (and depended upon) a variety of wildlife – and been their home and feeding and nesting areas.

Therefore, an environmentally friendly garden recreates this balance, with layers of different types of trees, shrubs and groundcovers. This then provides a food source and living area for our native birds and animals, *and in the process your garden can become virtually maintenance free.*

However, whether common or rare, all the birds and other wildlife that visit your garden will have specific needs, and they all need water, food shelter and nesting areas. An environmentally friendly garden should therefore have:

Layers of vegetation.

These provide a variety of food and shelter for the wildlife, as well as being home to other creatures that are a food source. Plant layers of trees, shrubs and ground cover in clumps. On the ground have a layer of bark, twigs and leaves to spread around the trees as mulch. This leaf litter layer offers natural protection for the plants, helping the ground retain moisture and keeping the ground cool in summer and warm in winter.

A diversity of year round vegetation.

You want to be able to provide food and shelter for throughout the year - for butterflies, birds, (insectivorous birds, seed eating birds, honeyeaters, etc.) and other wildlife. So make sure that your bushland friendly garden has a variety of food plants for throughout the year. (i.e. that you have plants that flower at different times of the year - so that there is food for throughout the year.) Otherwise the birds and animals may not get enough food. *(This is easy to do - simply check the flowering times of any new plant, to make sure that you have plants that flower for throughout the year.)*

You also need food plants for honeyeaters, and plants with seed (such as grasses) for seedeaters, and plants for the specific birds in your area.

Logs and ground cover

Logs and ground cover can not only become decorative features in your garden, but they are vital as shelters and nesting sites for lizards and small creatures.

A frog pond and birdbath

Water is essential for the survival of our wildlife. Frogs need water to lay their eggs in, while most of our wildlife needs to drink water. (For example, seed eaters such as the finches need to drink hourly to help their digestion.) Birds also need water to bathe in and to cool down in during hot weather.

Frogponds. Frogs are the original gardeners and insect catchers. However, our frogs are disappearing. You can help frogs and help to increase their numbers by providing them with a place to breed in (their food will be the insects in your garden). A frog pond can be something as cheap and simple as a hard plastic baby bath or toddlers pool, or it can be a landscaped garden pond that adds to the value of your property.

A pond will provide a water source for a variety of birds and animals. It will also encourage frogs to your yard and is necessary for tadpoles. A pond with a gently sloping bank on one side will also offer a safe water supply for a variety of wildlife. Place the pond where it can get partial shade (75%) and fill it with rainwater or tapwater that has been in the sunlight for 5-7 days to remove the chlorine. Do not use detergent or other chemicals in the water.

Hint: if you only have a courtyard or a small yard try having a pond/waterfall arrangement as a centerpiece for your yard. Put in two small linked ponds with a waterfall, and have a frog pond off to the side. The frog pond then can be a quiet, semi-hidden pond overhung by lush greenery and branches.

Bird baths. Encourage birds into your garden, as all birds need water. Put the birdbath slightly out from some dense shrubs where it will get partial shade. The birds can then use these shrubs as a shelter, and they can check their safety before using the birdbath. Make sure the birdbath is on a pedestal so it can be out of the reach of cats. Alternatively, put the birdbath in the middle of the yard and as far away as possible from all bushes, etc, that could hide predators. (But remember that if it is out in the open the water will evaporate faster – so you will need to check it daily).

A shelter and nesting area

In the quietest corner of your yard (and as far from the house as possible) plant an area of densely foliated trees and shrubs as a protected shelter/nesting area for the birds and animals. A number of shrubs with prickles clumped together can make a suitable nesting /shelter area and can deter cats and dogs - particularly if it extends to meet your neighbours bushland areas and helps to link up the bushland areas.

Hint: If it is along a back fence or near your neighbours bush areas the shelter/nesting area can merge with other areas in yards to form green corridors where animals can move safely, away from the roads and people.

Nesting materials include: mud, cobwebs, moss, twigs, grasses and plant fibres. So if you have cobwebs and grasses around that's good as they can be used by the birds.

A Green corridor

For many wildlife species it is essential that bushland areas are linked by corridors of vegetation. These green corridors mean that the wildlife can move around to find new food and territories, and it prevents inbreeding and helps them avoid natural disasters. They are also important for nomadic and migratory species to move safely, and many of our bird species are migratory.

Therefore, if you create an environmentally friendly garden you are helping create a green corridor that helps our wildlife to survive. And the larger the corridor of trees and bushes the better, as it provides a habitat for more species than a narrow strip of isolated trees.

Hint: To create a green corridor for tree dwelling mammals plant a variety of gums, about one metre apart, near fences (especially along back fences) and linking any neighbours' bushland areas. This will enable them to move safely between areas out of the way of domestic pets. Planting an understorey around the trees will also help.

Large or dead trees

Both large and dead trees provide many species of our wildlife with shelter and hollows for nesting sites. They can also be a lookout and resting spot for some bird species. Therefore, if the **large trees and dead trees are chopped down some of our most beautiful, unusual or useful bird and animal species lose their nesting sites and shelters.**

Some of the birds and animals that nest in tree hollows are: parrots, lorikeets, kingfishers (including kookaburras) owls, pardalotes, dollar birds, treecreepers, possums, etc - even ducks! So encourage people to leave the large trees whenever possible, and before you remove dead trees consider: *Is it actually necessary to remove that tree? You could be destroying the nesting sites of a variety of birds and animals, including some endangered species.*

In urban areas large trees can also act as a beacon to attract birds to your yard. Birds flying by will see the tree over the roofline and will often go to them. *A large tree is an effective billboard to advertise your garden* as it will stand up over the roofs of other houses advertising your garden to birds near and far, and enticing them to the garden.

Hint: If you want to encourage birds and other wildlife into your yards and do not have a large or dead tree with hollows, some birds and animals will use nesting boxes - so place nesting boxes on your trees, etc. However, different birds and animals need different types of nesting boxes. So don't buy a generic box, but instead see what the experts recommend (for instance, Birds Australia has an information sheet that can help with this. See www.birdsaustralia.com.au).

Attracting wildlife to your garden:

Attracting birds

Different birds need different varieties of food. Some birds feed exclusively on insects, while others eat fruit, nectar, seeds, or small creatures. Therefore, if you want to attract birds to your garden have a YEAR ROUND supply of flowering plants, fruit and berry plants, and grasses (for the seed eaters).

Problem: Many birds, particularly the birds that eat the insects in your garden, may be poisoned if you use pesticides in abundance or unwisely - **so avoid using pesticides and be careful if you use pesticides and wish to have birds in your garden.**

Koalas, possums and other mammals.

Koalas and possums are the animals who really need a green corridor. Koalas need gum trees (many lists will tell you which local trees are their food source), and both koalas and possums need enough trees close together to make a safe route above ground to travel between trees. If you or neighbors have dogs do not plant anything in the yard (away from the fence) that the koala or possum may go for, such as a gum tree or food source tree – and do lock up your cat and/or dog at night.

Koalas also need water during droughts and have been known to drown in swimming pools when searching for water. For this reason, if you have a pool always have a thick, sturdy rope anchored to something and hanging down into the water at a couple of points, so they can find it and climb out. But better still, put a large container (such as an ice cream container) full of water near the base of a tree right next to the fence – so that any thirsty animals will not need to go as far as the pool. All koalas often need is a source of water and their favourite

eucalypt leaves. (And if ever designing a pool, do design it with a sloping entrance at one side – this will ensure you will have no drowned animals in your pool.)

If there are koalas in your area, most local councils or the local wildlife organizations have leaflets that will help you – so check with your local council or conservation body.

If you live near a reserve or open grassland area where there can be the occasional kangaroo or other wildlife, in time of drought think about putting out buckets of water for them if their normal water source has dried up. Place this as far from the house as possible, as wildlife and people often don't mix. Nor do you want to endanger wildlife by enticing them to where they can get killed by dogs, or hit by cars. If you have wildlife and stock also try and allow some water for the wildlife - biodiversity is important for all of our futures.

Attracting butterflies

Butterflies are important pollinators of plants, and add colour and variety to your garden. However, some butterflies only feed on specific plants or need certain host plants to lay their eggs on. Therefore, to attract butterflies into your garden grow the plants that they need and are attracted to. Greening Australia and other organisations sometimes have leaflets on butterfly attracting plants. Otherwise, the book *"Attracting Butterflies to your Garden"* by Densey Clyne (New Holland Publishers, Sydney, 2003) will show you what butterflies are found where in Australia (with maps) and what are the native food and host plants for each species.

Problem: As their food and host plants are becoming rare and disappearing, certain species of butterflies and moths are using some introduced plants instead. However, it is important for the environment and for the other wildlife dependent upon the disappearing native vegetation that we try to help re-establish the native plants rather than grow the introduced ones. In many cases the introduced plant species would have been responsible for the disappearance of the native plants in the first place, taking over an area and out-competing the native plants. So ask your local nursery for the native plants lists. Even if they do not have a list, it is important to encourage them to start growing them, and to re-introduce our native plants to the area.

Insects and your garden.

Many insects help your garden. Some insects pollinate plants while others feed on insect pests. However, spraying your garden indiscriminately may destroy the insects (and frogs as well) that help control the pests as well as the pests. A population explosion can then occur among the pests that are resistant to the spraying. So instead of using pesticides in your garden encourage the frogs, insects, bats and birds and other wildlife that eat insects into your garden, and these will help you keep the pests down.

Hint: Frogs and many birds need to be near water, so to encourage frogs and birds have a frog pond and bird bath in your yard.

Frogs and your garden

Our frogs are disappearing. Once upon a time there would have been frogs in most gardens. There they would have kept the insects down as well. However, many species of frogs have disappeared in the last twenty years, and even some of the more common ones are becoming scarce. Throughout Australia this problem has been aggravated by the fact that, as residential areas have increased, many ponds have been filled in and small streams or occasional watercourses have been turned into concrete drains. Moreover, many ponds and water areas are now sprayed against mosquitoes while gutters are sprayed with herbicide. For frogs you need a frog pond, and plants, rocks and sticks both in and around the pond. *For more information on frog ponds see the previous section on 'A frog pond and birdbath'*

Lizards and your garden

Lizards eat many insects and control pests. In turn they are food for kookaburras and other birds, so they make an important inclusion in your garden. Make sure that you have logs, rocks, a layer of ground cover and leaf litter for lizards to shelter in.

Where to get the plants

There are now autochthonous (indigenous/ local native) nurseries in many areas around Australia, and many towns will provide lists of the autochthonous plants for their area, and sometimes lists of plants that attract birds. For example, in Brisbane and Melbourne and many other Australian shires, towns and cities you can get a list of the plants that are indigenous to your suburb, and the nursery will sell you these plants. In other areas (such as Katoomba and Gosford you can even buy the rarer plants that were in your yard before it was developed!! An organisation called Wildplants goes to areas due to be cleared and removes the rarer, more endangered, endemic, and just plain pretty or unusual plants. These are then potted and looked after, and if residents are interested they can buy them back for their yard – a truly indigenous garden!!

Check the yellow pages for nurseries that sell indigenous/autochthonous plants, or ring up the local council's environment section or your local Greening Australia or Landcare branch and see if they know where you can buy indigenous plants. Many of these branches, if they are undertaking revegetating projects, will need indigenous plants.

Problem: Sometimes the lists of bird or butterfly friendly plants are not of local plants - and you could be introducing a problem plant into your area. So always check these lists to see that they are local native plants! (We once tried to buy a plant that was on a butterfly list. Our local native nursery said they didn't have it - but it was growing feral in fields nearby if I wanted it. *Although listed, it was the introduced weed "Stinking Roger!!!)*

Other hints for a wildlife friendly garden

- If you have plants that are native to the area not only will they be good for the wildlife but they should not need as much watering or "looking after" – so whenever possible buy plants that are local to the area.
- Save water by planting in clumps.
- Minimise your use of pesticides. Pesticides can harm the wildlife. Rain and hosing can also wash chemicals from fertiliser and pesticides into the creeks and waterways, causing problems to the waterways and surrounding bushland areas. There are currently many books that will tell you about organic, or more environmentally friendly, ways to garden.
- Also minimize your use of fertilisers as this can also harm the wildlife. Fertilisers can also be washed into the creeks and waterways, causing problems to the waterways and surrounding bushland areas. Moreover:
 - a) Australia's local native plants are often used to a poor soil. So by enriching the soil you may make it harder for local native plants to establish themselves, and easier for weeds.
 - b) If you must fertilise, use compost or mulch instead on your garden.
- Have a compost heap. This can include grass clippings and other garden waste, tea bags, vegetable scraps, some shredded paper, and other material - and this compost is an ideal fertilizer for your garden if you need fertilizer.