

## Confined to the Garden- Week 10

There is a lot of talk of relaxing the lockdown and of a potential second peak. We've been given some provisional dates for some things to re-open but nothing is set in stone. My garden is still my best source of connection with nature and probably will be for quite a while yet. Lower petrol costs have allowed me to spend far more money on the garden than usual. I've already met and exceeded my annual target of at least one improvement for wildlife. I'm not stopping there though. Luckily, the goal for this year is to help pollinators and the only limit to how much I can do for them is the available space for flowering plants. I'm squeezing more in wherever I can.

The new plants in my flowering lawn are doing well, with Buttercups to keep them company. We've still had no rain so I'm diligently keeping them watered. I'll have to mow in another week or two to prevent the grass swamping the new plants. By then, they should be a bit more resilient and I'll remove the marker sticks.



Flowering lawn plants

I seem to have been bitten by the plant-buying bug. Another batch of plugs has been ordered but delivery will take around three weeks. Watch this space to see what else I'll be planting for pollinators. In the meantime, I've been re-arranging the plants I already have. This planter made of old tyres was originally used for growing potatoes. It has grown other edibles such as onions and garlic too. Usually quite successfully as it's in a good sunny spot against the back wall of the house. It's been empty for a while as I hadn't decided what to put in it next. Having given it some thought, I'm sticking with the edible theme but also making it pollinator friendly. This is my new miniature herb garden.



Miniature herb garden for pollinators

I've had the Rosemary growing in a pot for a long time and it badly needed cutting back. It now has a new home with lots of sunshine and plenty of room to spread its roots. For a companion it has some

chives I picked up on a recent trip to a local farm shop. I hope they will soon be joined by some mint. I tried bringing some old seeds to life but there has been no sign of germination so I'm taking a different approach.



Mint cuttings

These 'cuttings' came out of a bag of fresh mint from the supermarket. Although they are a bit short, I'm hoping at least some of them will start to produce roots and I can add them to my little herb garden. Mint, Chives and Rosemary all produce flowers attractive to bees, with the added bonus that they smell nice when I'm sitting out in the garden and we can use them in the kitchen.

Pollen is still being taken into the bee hotels by Red Mason Bees, but there's not much room left at the inn. Even the smaller tubes are being filled now. Every tube capped with mud is now a nursery for the next generation of Red Mason Bees. I hope they will emerge next spring to find my garden is a better source of pollen and nectar than it was this year.





Bee hotels

I will be putting up some more of these hotels as the mason bees have occupied almost every tube. There is no space left for the leafcutter bees, who will begin to emerge soon and will need nursery space of their own. There must be a lack of suitable nesting sites for them as in the past I have found the end of my garden hose plugged with delicately cut pieces of leaf!

It's not only flowers and pollinators though. This week, I've had another look in my tiny pond. It's teeming with little creatures now. The buttercups around the edge have spread into the water, providing much needed shade and hiding places for aquatic invertebrates.



Buttercups in the pond

Last time I examined the inhabitants of my pond there were two types of snails: Dwarf pond snails and Wandering snails. I've now noticed a third species. It's one of the Planorbis or Ramshorn snails. Not the big Ramshorns, one of the tiny ones. There are some other new additions to the cast of aquatic characters since last time I checked, lots of larvae and nymphs of things like Hoverflies, Stoneflies, Mosquitoes etc.... still no amphibians to eat them though. Maybe next year.



Planorbis snails

While reading about snails online to identify these, I discovered that pond snails are another garden species with complex and fascinating breeding habits. Most of the common British pond snails are hermaphrodites and can reproduce very rapidly to colonise a pond. There are some species that have males and females, but some of that group can reproduce without a mate, so they also have no problem producing numerous offspring!

Click here for some more interesting information about pond snails:

<http://www.pondexpert.co.uk/pond-snails-inyourpond.html>

As it is so small and gets quite a lot of sun, the water in my little pond gets very warm. This has led to rapid growth of filamentous algae or 'blanket weed'. Blanket weed is a perfectly natural part of a pond ecosystem and provides shelter for all sorts of pond life, but it can cause problems in small garden ponds. One of the fastest growing types of algae, it can grow 2 metres or more per day and left unchecked, can quickly choke a small pond like mine. There are actually over 500 species of algae known as blanket weed and it has several other common names, like 'string algae', 'horse hair' and 'woolly algae'. It varies in colour from yellowish green to green to brown. This thread-like algae has no leaves, stem or roots. It floats freely and can attach itself to rocks or the side of the pond. It

also clings to beneficial oxygenating plants, smothering them and reducing oxygen levels. I've been removing blanket weed regularly to avoid it filling the entire pond. I always leave it on the side so that any creatures in the weed can make their way back into the water.



Blanket weed

Click the link below for advice on controlling blanket weed and other algae in wildlife ponds:  
<https://www.wildflowershop.co.uk/Info%20&%20Advice/blanket%20weed%20algae%20control.htm>

Advice on other common pond problems:  
<https://sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/discover/in-your-garden/article/15>

Back on dry land, I've been putting leftover Hedgehog food out for 3Paws, the visiting vixen. Most nights she misses out because the Hedgehogs have emptied the bowl before she arrives. On Sunday there was a lot of dry Hedgehog food spilled in the feeding station. I swept it out onto the patio and 3Paws managed to eat a good share of it in the early hours of Monday morning, despite the protestations of a Hedgehog who was also trying to take advantage of this extra bounty.



Sharing with 3Paws

To see a short video clip of 3Paws sharing with the Hedgehog, click here:

<https://youtu.be/qKJIsKsP2BI>

To see a longer video of 3Paws' entire visit, click here:

<https://youtu.be/8XQ10bX5Zxk>

Later the same week, we had a broken egg stuck to the bottom of the egg box. I put the whole thing out for 3Paws, to see what she would do with it. She managed it very well and licked all the remaining egg out of the shell without removing it from the box.



3Paws with her egg

To see a video of 3Paws enjoying another egg, click the link below:

<https://youtu.be/b4Xp8l8bs1o>

This Magpie has also discovered the presence of free food and is taking advantage on a regular basis.



Magpie

As well as Foxes and Magpies, there have been Hedgehogs eating the food too. Lots of food. There are at least five individuals visiting regularly, five is the most I have seen in the garden at the same time so far this year. The Hedgehogs were not interested in the egg at all though. I find this

intriguing, as Hedgehogs are supposed to eat the eggs of ground nesting birds. Perhaps these hogs haven't read the book that says they eat eggs!

Hedgehogs are very messy eaters and often climb into the bowl to eat. This week a hungry female turned the dinner table into the dance floor as she was courted by an enthusiastic male without leaving the bowl.

To see a short video clip of this dinner-dance, click the link below:

<https://youtu.be/UumTUkmd8-Q>

Just before this couple settled down to their courtship in the food bowl, they were interrupted by a third hog who watched them for a moment without interrupting but was not tolerated for long. The courting male headbutts him, gives him a shake, then shoves him into the pond for good measure, and goes back to his hungry female.



An unwelcome third hog

To see a video of this, click the link below:

<https://youtu.be/3AoW6xKLp1w>

Keep checking back here each week to see what I've been doing to improve my garden for wildlife and what my nocturnal visitors have been getting up to.