

# growing wild

## Sharon Henshall goes wild... with her garden, that is!

My childhood memories include running along a disused railway line behind my nan's garden. Wild flowers dancing in the breeze, long grasses tickling my bare legs and clumps of burr seeds sticking to my fallen-down socks. They were happy times! And not just for me... wildlife was abundant; bees, butterflies, dragonflies and a colourful array of bugs all living harmoniously without a sniff of territorial warfare – or at least none that my innocent eyes witnessed.

### changing landscapes

At some point during my younger years, that disused track was offered as extra land to all the homes lining its edge. Soon the once-average-sized gardens leapt into half-acre plots. A narrow path was all that was left, and farmer's fields stretched far beyond. The environment for wildlife seemed to be changed forever as the previously wild land evolved into cared-for gardens. My nan, and other family members, worked hard to tame it. There was much soil digging, turf laying, tree planting, seed sowing and tea drinking. The result was magnificent – my nan has the greenest fingers of anyone I know. Flowers bloomed, fruit trees blossomed and vegetables were in abundance. Thankfully, the wildlife seemed grateful for her hard work – still plenty to keep them happy. Birds soon became my nan's great friends. Her generous spirit ensured seeds, nuts and fat balls were offered on a daily basis. They also had an array of bird baths to pick from... never had keeping clean been so much fun!

When visiting, we'd barely have clambered out of our battered family mini before she'd be pointing out the new additions to her garden. It was always the first place she took any new arrival... chatting nineteen to the dozen about her bumper crop of pears, the strong, sweet scent of her favourite roses and the challenges of keeping 'spot leaf' at bay. She'd proudly show off the likes of newly flowering forsythia taken from sneaky cuttings she'd snipped from gardens on trips into town or family outings to parks. We always left laden with tomatoes, apples, pears, carrots and anything else that was

in season at the time. I remember once returning home with her freshly pulled garlic bulbs – their pungent scent lingered in the car for weeks.

My fingers, on the other hand, are less green... did that green gene skip my blueprint I wonder? These days, however, I have realised that I am increasingly drawn to my outdoor space. Living in the inner city makes my small garden an important escape and I did finally begin growing veg a few years ago. But, my 'limited time' style of gardening has overlooked a rather important aspect of any outdoor space... flowers!

### bee the change...

A talk I'd attended by Brigit Strawbridge about bees a few years back had stuck in my mind. I'd been shocked at her mention of the decimation of our country's meadows... apparently over the last seventy years we have lost 98% of our once rich and diverse grasslands and wildflowers, as well as small woodlands and hedgerows. I found this almost beyond comprehension... how could this have been allowed? Naturally the impact on nature and wildlife has been unimaginably detrimental. "Many of our more 'specialist' bumblebees have now been driven to the brink; of the twenty-five species of British bumblebee, only six are still common," explained Brigit. "The biggest decline has been in bees with long tongues that rely almost exclusively on wild flowers with long corollas." With this in mind, adding wild flowers into my colour-free garden felt the obvious option.

### nan knows best

Understandably, nan was my first port of call. Now aged 94, she has only recently moved into a care home. Leaving her beloved garden hadn't been easy but not one to pine

for days gone by, she was admirably positive and still had plenty to say. I knew she'd started a wildflower section to her garden and was keen to see what advice she could offer. Within minutes of me calling she reeled off a few names - Wild Campanulas, Geraniums and Marjoram. She clarified that she meant the 'wild' options, concerned I'd run out and buy the cultivated seed options – these have had much of the goodness taken out and so don't offer the same benefits for the wildlife. She told me grasses were another important aspect to a wild flower plot – not something that would have actually crossed my mind – I still had a lot to learn. Nan said they attracted the butterflies.

This statement instantly jumped her to stinging nettles... everyone should apparently allow a few stinging nettles to remain in their garden! This, she informed me, is where the butterflies lay their eggs – nicely protected over the winter months.

Well, now she was on a roll... her mind racing and instructions a plenty. She barely paused for breath... "Rake, seed, rake again. Water at the time you throw the seeds down but then leave it to do its own thing. Chuck down a handful and see what happens. Chuck down a 2nd lot if nothing does." I scribbled down the details as fast as I could and my nan's enthusiasm was contagious. After eventually putting down the phone, which was not before being told that there were wild seeds back at her 'yet to be sold' bungalow that I could have, I headed for the internet to gather further information. I wanted to know what worked well together in a small space.

### flower power

I came across a fabulous website by Sarah Raven ([www.sarahraven.com](http://www.sarahraven.com)) who has worked on a BBC2 series called 'Bees, Butterflies and Blooms' aired this March. She is on a mission to bring 'flower power to our towns, cities and countryside' due to the rapid decline in essential honey bees and pollinating insects. I'd struck gold... her website had a 'Create a mini wildflower

garden' page which was positively bubbling over with amazing tips and advice. It was pretty much as my nan said, along with a few extra gems to increase chances of success. One tip I spotted was that Ox-eye Daisy and Common Knapweed can be take-over agents so should be sown in lesser quantity. Do have a read if you fancy giving a wildflower garden a go too. She gives her top ten of wild flowers and grasses for your garden that includes the likes of Lady's Bedstraw, Tufted Vetch and Great Burnet.

### local knowledge

I was now starting to get somewhere but, being based in Bristol, I felt speaking with Avon Wildlife Trust was a must. Janice Gardiner was my point of contact and my notepad instantly filled with lots more useful information. "By growing native plants and wildflowers such as Bluebells, Cowslips, and Foxgloves they can be havens for us and wild creatures," Janice told me. She explained how flowery borders or lawns are a must, attracting butterflies and bees that are vital for the pollination of our crops and fruit trees. "Try to have something in flower every month, for a year-round nectar supply," Janice recommended and told me that when making a garden meadow bring in the smell of fresh cut hay, with sweet vernal grass and the lovely seed heads of quaking grass and crested dog's tail. She pointed me to a particular section on their website ([www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlifegardening](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlifegardening)), which offered a wealth of information on growing wildflowers.

My final quest was to get back in touch with Brigit Strawbridge. She was the one who had sown the seed in my mind, after all. I wanted a few extra tips to ensure I included flowers that were particularly good for bees. Brigit told me how one of the easiest things we can do to attract bees to our garden is to leave our grass uncut between June and August. This will apparently encourage Clovers and Vetches that are great for bumblebees and solitary bees. Dandelions are apparently another excellent source of

pollen and nectar, and because they are composites (made up of lots of tiny florets), bees will stay feeding on them – giving you enough time to get a good look at them too. However, we mustn't forget to cut dandelions before they go to seed if we wish to avoid them spreading like crazy. "Other favourites for bumblebees are Viper's Bugloss, Self Heal, Bugle, Dead Nettle, Field Scabious and Yellow Rattle," Brigit said. "And, wild flowers always do better when grown on ground with low soil fertility." I was happy to hear this as it fits well with my 'low maintenance' gardening style! She suggested [plantwild.co.uk](http://plantwild.co.uk) as a good website to purchase our seeds.

### in our hands...

From all the information I'd gathered, I could see how even if every garden only went a touch wild, we could turn things back around. "There are over 1 million acres of gardens in the UK," points out Brigit. "So together we can make a huge difference by making our gardens 'bee friendly'." To safeguard the future of our wildlife and for more colour in our gardens, it seems there is only one answer... go wild! Count me in.

