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Heaven for Insects

A Wildlife-friendly Garden in GB - Chepstow
NP16 5DL (Monmouthshire, South Wales)

My partner Nigel and I moved to our present house in 2009. It is located in Chepstow, a small town lying on the Welsh side of the border between Wales and England. We are close to the Bristol Channel, which is a broad inlet of the sea.

The climate here is fairly rainy, but winters are usually fairly mild compared to those in central Europe. Shrubs from the Mediterranean area and New Zealand such as Myrtus, Cistus, Rosmarinus and Hebe grow very

well and are not usually damaged in winter. Nevertheless we can get plenty of frost and snow in a cold winter, although the very cold periods usually do not last very long. The soil is based on limestone (Kalk) and sandstone, and is very well-drained, so we have ideal growing conditions.

There was not very much in the garden when we arrived, and we have created the garden gradually over five years. We did not have a plan, we just let it evolve. The garden

is not very big (16m x 16m) but it has a sunny south facing aspect. We also have a small but interesting front garden. We purchased many of the plants on-line from mail order plant nurseries. Others we have grown from seed, and others we brought with us from our last garden.

We love to watch insects in the garden visiting flowers, as we think that they give life and movement to the garden. To encourage them, we have planted two areas of flo-

wers to attract pollinators. These are what we call our pollinator borders. One area is a raised bed, dry and sunny, and the other is shadier, with deeper soil that is slightly damper. The sunny border is full of colour in the summer from the flowers, plus movement from the insects and plants moving in the wind – we liken it to a tropical coral reef.

Following the British gardening tradition, we put plants close together so that when they grow they intermingle and sup-

port each other. We chose a large range of plants, that we know will be attractive to insects as well as attractive to us! These turn out to be mainly of Western European origin. We extend the season with some North American perennials, mainly various kinds of Aster and Helianthus which flower in late summer. We use a few plants from other parts of the world: for example selected forms of Hebe from New Zealand like the local climate and make attractive ever-

green shrubs. They are closely related to Veronica and attract a wide range of insects in the summer. Penstemon heterophyllus from California is another of our favourites, nice to look at and very attractive to bees of all kinds. Small solitary bees seem to particularly favour yellow flowers in the Asteraceae such as Hieraceum and Tanacetum. Two that are particularly garden-worthy are Hieraceum maculatum with spotted leaves, and the beautiful Leontodon rigens.

1 In early summer our small lawn is full of flowers. We mow short paths through it.

2 A Shield Bug (Palomena) sits on a Leucanthemum flower.

3 Fruit trees and hedging shrubs give height and structure.



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4 Limestone rocks are covered with typical flowers such as *Geranium sanguineum* and a *Dianthus*.

5 The Scarlet Tiger (*Callimorpha dominula*) is a day-flying moth common in this area.



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6 More herbaceous plants and fruit trees, in the traditional 'cottage garden' style of planting.

7 *Genista tinctoria* is found in hay meadows in the UK. Our form is very low-growing.

8 Larvae of the Mullein Moth (*Shargacucullia verbasci*) feed on *Verbascum*.



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9 A purple-leaved form of *Angelica sylvestris* in the foreground contrasts with the fragrant white flowers of *Philadelphus microphyllus*.



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In common with most gardens in the UK we have a lawn. It is fairly small, and we created it ourselves by sowing grass and wild flower seed into a very poor sub-soil. As a result it contains lots of wild flowers and we experiment with different ways of mowing it so that we get plenty of flowers as well as a place to sit and drink our cup of tea (every gardener's privilege) and somewhere to dry the washing.

We do not grow vegetables in our garden. But we do have lots of fruit trees. These are all grafted on to dwarfing rootstocks, to keep them reasonably small. The fruit trees, together with hedgerow shrubs such as hawthorn (Weißdorn) provide height and structure and attract birds to the garden. Because we do not use pesticides, most fruit trees seem to have various kinds of

aphids living on them, and these provide food for various kinds of small birds. We also have Slow Worms (Blindschleichen) living in the garden. They are very common in this area.

We also use tall perennials to give structure and height – so-called architectural plants. Our favourites at present are *Thalictrum fla-*

vum, whose yellow flowers contrast beautifully with *Valeriana officinalis*. The latter is a very variable plant, but we grow a tall form with very pale pink flowers. Both of these prefer damp soil and make good companions. Later in the year other tall perennials provide height.

We like to imagine the gardener as a 'painter' who can use wildlife-friendly plants not only to attract insects and birds, but also to create a garden of beauty using shape, form, colour and fragrance. And the garden

can also be a place of wonder and of education, where children can experience nature. By providing nectar, pollen and shelter early in the year and in the late summer and autumn, gardens are an important resource for many insects. For example, scientific research in the UK has shown that gardens support populations of some species, such as various bumblebees, at a similar rate of abundance to the best wild habitats. This is unsurprising, because gardens are simply just another type of habitat, and by filling them with insect-friendly flowers we crea-

te a little sanctuary for insects which, from their point of view, is no different to a flower-filled hillside.

We do not pay strict attention to the concept of 'native' because this is a human concern, reflecting human social structures and preconceptions. Insects and birds do not read books and study maps, but they do know what they like. By observing them, we have also learnt what they like and we have planted it in our garden.

Short profile

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View of the garden on request: Yes

Years of construction: 2009–2014

Size: 260 m²

Native plants:

many species, but we don't like to classify them this way

Non native plants:

same comment applies

Most favourite plants:

too many to mention!

Main features:

pond, bee house, pollinator borders, lawn, fruit trees



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10 *Salvia nemorosa* is originally from central Europe. It is not found as a wild flower in the UK, but is commonly grown in gardens here.

11 Close planting around our pond provides shelter for frogs and slow worms.

12 Red clover (*Trifolium pratense*) and Bladder Campion (*Silene vulgaris*) grow in the lawn. In autumn and winter they will be mown short.



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Marc Carlton

(Fotos: Kerstin Lüchow)