

Adding Purpose to your Garden Design

When designing gardens these days, especially wildlife gardens, we talk about mimicking a habitat. But it is challenging to translate a habitat type legibly and functionally, especially in small gardens. A woodland arrangement, for example, requires more than one tree to suggest woodland with its understory community of shrubs, perennials, bulbs, grasses, and groundcovers. Yet, a single tree is as much as can be fitted into many urban gardens. The resulting effort is simply a small shade garden.

So, what is the difference?

Relating a design to a habitat type helps to influence aspects of the design, aligning it further along ecological lines than is usually the case. Plant choice can be made not only on how they look – texture, contrast, form, flower colour – but for what they provide – food, nesting sites, soil protection, protective cover. Looking at a shade garden as just that might result in a design that includes a single tree, a form or focal plant such as a Cycad, a mid-height shrub with colourful or scented flowers, and a range of low-growing filler plants that add colour and interest. Relate it to a habitat type and the gardener is encouraged to think about the purpose of the feature tree - what does it provide for wildlife, for example - and how this anchor species can help to build up a small eco-system beneath it. The plant community can include a variety of understory species that offer the foliage link between the tree canopy and lower level plants. Shrub selection could include species that provide ground level food for caterpillars and flowers for butterflies and other insects, or berries for your local birds. With a healthy food chain operating, the insects, in turn, will be food for ground-foraging birds. The woodland edge could be planted up with both shade and sun-loving grasses for the little seed eaters – to link the sunny garden with the shadier woodland. Evergreen species that retain winter cover should be included to provide winter protection, and, if possible, winter fruits.

A light, evergreen creeper allowed to scramble up the structure of the tree will soften the bare outline of a deciduous silhouette and shelter birds and other wildlife through winter. Come spring; they are popular nesting sites.

The entire arrangement might ensure that the availability of food from treetop to ground floor is spread out through the year – berries, nuts, seeds, grasses, nectar and pollen. Deciduous species help to top up leaf mulch, providing over-wintering cover for beetles, millipedes, worms, snails, birds and butterfly larvae. As this material breaks down, it feeds the soil and soil organisms, as well as the plants – natural, safe, inexpensive fertiliser.

Other points to look at to improve life for garden creatures:

- Does your perimeter wall have openings to allow movement of small animals?
- Before you fill a crack or gap in stone or block walls, is it necessary? Lizards, millipedes, and many other animals will find refuge here, and even the small birds could utilise them as nesting sites, in short supply in urban gardens.
- If your paved patio covers a sizeable area, can you replace any pavers with plants? These small green squares can act as stepping stones that allow safe, cool movement across what amounts to the Sahara Desert to these tiny creatures, many of which will desiccate (dry out) in the scorching sun.
- Rather choose an open wire fence or wooden slatted fence with wide gaps instead of a solid wall. Provide screening with shrubs and creepers, popular with wildlife for the shelter, nesting sites and the food they offer.
- Expanses of open lawn? Place and shape beds and group trees and shrubs to connect, for example, a water source to the flower garden, the grassland display to the woodland edge. As most animals make use of a variety of habitats, myriad wildlife will use these safe green corridors between them.
- Do you need the hedge to be clipped to within an inch of its life? A well-maintained hedge can be a thing of beauty, but could you let go of a few of your clipped shrubs – or clip-clip-clip less often? Constant maintenance can cause injury (a neighbour chopped off the leg of a Tree Frog), scare animals away, and, if preventing the fruiting and flowering of the plant, offer a bare cupboard to wildlife. If neatness and control are required in an area, look at small-leaved, well-behaved shrubs that need just a little snipping now and then.

A few small changes made with others in mind can have a significant impact; much of it won't be immediately visible, but, when the wildlife move in, and bird calls greet your early morning cup of coffee, well, that is much more satisfying than a clipped hedge and acres of lawn.