Nursery gardens can offer a haven for wildlife when food and warmth are in short supply, and children can benefit by helping out—as Julie Mountain explains in part three of her winter series.
children can observe visiting birds, animals or insects without disturbing them. You might like to make a tally chart of the various birds or animals, so that children can mark-make each time they spot one. Not all creatures can be spotted ‘in person’, so go out on a Poo Hunt to see if you can find animal droppings – the Nature Detectives website has a downloadable Poo Spotter Chart.

You could also use your den-building materials to create a temporary winter ‘hide’ – use dark-coloured fabrics or tarpaulins and discuss the importance of camouflage and hush to enable children to observe birds and animals without frightening them away. If you have a shed, shine a torch up into its dark and dusty eaves and animals without frightening them away. If you have a shed, shine a torch up into its dark and dusty eaves – they are a favourite place for hibernating butterflies.

WINTER TASKS
Gardening is an excellent way of maintaining children’s physical dexterity through winter and requires both fine motor skills and big muscle co-ordination. Keep your garden well maintained in the following ways:

- Lop loose branches on trees and bigger shrubs and remove them before they become a hazard; it is particularly important to check after high winds. Leave small twigs and leaf litter – they will be used by nesting birds or animals.
- Spring bulbs are usually planted by December. Instead, look through summer seed and bulb catalogues to plan what the garden could look like later in the year.
- Mulch around the base of shrubs to help retain moisture and warmth around their roots. Children will enjoy wheelbarrowing and distributing the mulch using their ‘real’ tools (see part two of this series, ‘Play it safe’, for suppliers).
- If you have a pond, ensure there are holes in the ice to allow animals to drink and pond life to breathe. Boil a kettle of water and watch what happens to the ice as you pour it (carefully) on the ice at the edge of the pond.
- Continue to water plants in tubs regularly – frost can dry them out. ‘Huddling’ your container plants together in a sheltered corner can help retain warmth, as can lifting them from the ground onto a couple of bricks, a few crates or even your hollow blocks.
- Install bird boxes: they may not be colonised until spring, but are easier to install when trees are bare of leaves.

You will need:
- packets of lard or vegetable fat
- seed mix – for example, wild bird seed, sunflower seeds, grated cheese, bacon scraps, porridge oats
- yoghurt cartons
- a pair of scissors
- twine.

To make the feeders:
- Make a hole in the base of each yoghurt pot and thread a long length of twine through, leaving a good ‘tail’ inside the pot
- Melt the lard in a pan or microwave (it need not be hot, just runny)
- In a big bowl, mix one part lard to two parts of your seed mix and stir well until all of the lard has been absorbed into the seed mixture. You should have a thick, lumpy, sticky porridge
- Pack the yoghurt pots with the warm seed and lard mixture and place in the fridge to set overnight
- Cut the yoghurt pots off the fat balls and use the twine to hang them from trees and shrubs.

Julie Mountain is director of Play Learning Life CIC Play, dedicated to working alongside you to develop high-quality outdoor play experiences all year round, www.playlearninglife.org.uk

FEED THE BIRDS
Brightly coloured berries can cheer up the wintriest day and are a rich and valued food source for birds, but it is good practice to remind children that berries are for the birds, not for children. If you don’t have any berry-producing species in your garden then plan ahead for next year (see box). And whatever your supply of winter berries, you can still supplement them with yummy fat ball feeders, which are easy for children to make.

You might like to make a ‘free and found’ material and can be assembled by even the youngest children.
- The RHS’s Campaign for School Gardening is packed with information, advice and activities suitable for young gardeners, including details about winter gardening jobs, www.rhs.org.uk/children
- The Woodland Trust’s Nature Detectives programme has hundreds of excellent ideas for winter outdoor tasks, www.naturedetectives.org.uk/winter

For information on ‘bug hotels’, see: www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1096944/enabling-environments-outdoors-bug and do a Google image search for ‘bug hotels’. There are hundreds of quirky, clever, complicated and simple designs to provide inspiration for a winter building project for your children. Many use ‘free and found’ materials and can be assembled by even the youngest children.

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