

Wild at heart

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

Winter can be a hard time for wildlife, but a small investment of time will reap rewards in terms of birds, animals and colourful plant displays – and children, with your support, can do many of the tasks.

Few activities provide children with as much satisfaction as engaging in ‘real’ tasks, so make encouraging biodiversity in your garden part of your winter curriculum.

Feeding animals in winter is one of the most helpful and rewarding things that your children can do. Small saucers of food placed in discreet places around the garden will allow animals to eat and drink and encourage them to visit you more frequently. The plastic or terracotta drip trays from plant pots are ideal for this job. Explore your site with the children to identify half-hidden feeding spots so that animals don’t feel exposed when they come to feed.

While many mammals are hibernating in winter, it is not unusual to see squirrels or hedgehogs, or find evidence of mice, voles and foxes in the morning. Small mammals will enjoy kitchen scraps such as bacon, grated cheese and bread, while cat food is full of protein and carbohydrate and is an excellent source of nutrients for small mammals – but you might want to think twice about putting this out if your site is already frequented by local cats or foxes.

Digging compost into your soil in the winter will not only enrich the soil, but will provide food for worms, which themselves become food for birds. Digging is also a great, body-warming physical exercise for children (see box). Most insects are scarce in winter – having migrated, died or entered a kind of hibernation – so feeding the birds really is vital. However, keep bird food well away from mammal food to prevent the birds becoming dinner. Hanging wire

mesh bird feeders, home-made fat balls and bird tables will all encourage birds to visit your garden during the daytime, and remember to top up bird baths with warm water each day.

Insects survive winter in various clever ways, including by huddling together or generating their own ‘anti-freeze’ during autumn; opening a bug hotel could be your setting’s contribution. Anything from a simple log and stick pile through to an ambitious luxury ‘Buckingham Palace’ will help insects survive the winter and could provide breeding places (and food for birds) in early spring.

ISPY

Keep a pair of binoculars on a windowsill or by a glazed door so that

Gardening is an excellent way of maintaining children’s physical dexterity; a bug hotel made from a cutlery tray (far right)



YOUR WINTER GARDEN: PLANNING AND MAINTAINING

Winter need not be drab in the garden. There are plenty of ways of maintaining colour and scent in your planting. In fact, the lack of competing scents in winter means those plants that do have a fragrance really stand out.

If your garden is lacking in colour and fragrance this winter, plan ahead for next winter by choosing some of these species and planting them out in spring:

- *Mahonia* species have blue-black berries with bright yellow lily-of-the-valley scented flowers.
- Winter jasmine has masses of white or yellow flowers with the classic jasmine scent.
- *Viburnum* species – for example *tinus* or *x bodnantense* – have a sweet fragrance and pink or white flowers all through winter.



- Rosemary and lavender leaves retain their fragrance all year round – encourage children to squash them in their fingers.
- *Daphne bholua* ‘Jacqueline Postill’ is one of the RHS’s favourite winter shrubs, with an ‘intoxicating’ scent and large white flowers.
- *Cornus* (commonly known as dogwood) has golden red leaves in winter and these fall to display bright red bare stems in winter. Other

species have yellow flowers and stems throughout winter.

- *Malus* – several apple trees produce fruit in late autumn and early winter.
- Consider winter hanging baskets or bedding. They’ll need plenty of mulch to protect roots, but can provide a real splash of colour on a dull day.

Winter flowering or berry-producing species will be happiest in your garden’s sunniest, warmest spot and you will need to protect the roots with a thick layer of mulch.

Don’t forget that there are plenty of hardy vegetable species, many of which are attractive as well as tasty. Even a very small raised bed could provide children with secret underground potatoes, colourful squashes, bumpy



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 – they are a favourite place for hibernating butterflies.

sprout stems or leafy kale or spinach.

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.

MORE INFORMATION

- 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
- 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

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 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

