

Wildlife HAVEN

Plants and animals thrive in harmony in a beautiful setting at organic Stillingfleet Lodge Gardens where you can learn to nurture nature

WORDS BY CATHERINE TURNBULL



‘I don’t worry about greenfly and slugs. Our guinea fowl, chickens and bantams are great helpers in the garden’

with different birds, and butterflies, with frogs, toads, newts and dragonflies around the pond.

She admits that it can be a minefield navigating conflicting advice about gardening to create a habitat to attract and support wildlife. She has an issue with “no mow May”, the annual campaign to allow wildflowers to grow wild on lawns for a month, because it is not long enough “By the end of the month your flowers will be looking wonderful, but then it makes no sense to mow in June. It would be better to leave this until August, if you can. An alternative would be to mow the lawn regularly but not too short. Every lawn should have daisies. But then leave a wild area strip that is untouched.”

She also believes that a wildflower meadow should be wild with indigenous plants, but annual seeds can go in a garden or border. She adds that there is no excuse for plastic, or artificial grass. “I can understand it on a balcony perhaps, but there is no excuse to replace a lawn with this. It can’t go in landfill; it creates a desert but still needs to be maintained.”

Vanessa knows that people worry about pests in organic gardens. “I’ve been gardening organically for 50 years and don’t worry about greenfly and slugs. The birds help deal with many pests. Our guinea fowl, chickens and ➔



Nearly 50 years ago the garden and nursery at Stillingfleet Lodge six miles south of York was derelict farmland. The quintessentially English garden managed to be as wildlife friendly as possible was planted in 1975 by Vanessa Cook and her husband John.

The beauty of her abundant cottage gardens surrounding an 18th century farmhouse, overflowing with trees, shrubs, unusual and rare local plants, colours and scents, and buzzing with insects and birds, seems so natural that it is easy to forget they represent years of devoted hard work.

The couple and their four children began to live the good life and had a smallholding for 10 years. They took on sheep, pigs and poultry, and restored an old vegetable patch that was the only piece of garden in the surrounding land. “It was a time when food prices became cheap through supermarkets, but intensive food production was burning a hole in the ozone layer. Now people are

coming back to growing their own food,” Vanessa says. Already a keen botanist, she returned to college to study horticulture. “The planting emphasises a cottage garden style and every part is maintained organically,” she says.

“We purposefully leave seed heads as food for birds and limit cutting back to provide habitat for insects.”

Wildlife is attracted by the insects and bugs that live in the left-over tree stumps and nettle patches, and hundreds of butterflies and bees thrive thanks to plants in a traditional hay meadow. There is a formal water garden, traditional and wildflower meadows, a large pond, woodland, and colourful scented cottage gardens, with unusual plants flowering at different times all year round.

Many wildlife groups use the gardens for research, including the British Trust for Ornithology, Butterfly Conservation, the Hedgehog Society and the Dragonfly Society. Rare species of bumble bees and moths have been found and the gardens are always alive



bantams are great helpers in the garden. I do capture snails and remove them. If your lupins are attacked by aphids, it is best not to grow lupins. You learn what grows well. We never spray anything for pests.

She also advocates leaving some leaves for the worms to break down. “We never use fertiliser and make our own compost and leaf mould and love to leave the lichen and moss on the apple trees.”

What makes her happy is seeing people get on with growing things. “It’s encouraging that people are aware of how important it is to look after the environment better. They are turning to the old varieties for gardens and allotments.”

Vanessa sells seeds from an amazing catalogue, plants from the nursery, offers gardening classes and talks, a wildlife day in June and hosts art exhibitions. “Species of wildflower seeds vary hugely across areas. We sell local seed that is not readily available as I prefer people to grow plants, although we sell them too.

“In 2018 we converted one of our 18th century barns into a café and hold monthly art exhibitions,” she says. “I have been interested in pictures and collected prints and ceramics for many years, so I was delighted to be able to support and show local artists in an ideal setting. Artists are chosen whose work is relevant to the ethos of the garden, so wildlife, flowers and landscapes are our usual exhibits.



“We have had etchings, linocuts and watercolours as well as botanical studies and photography. Each artist has the café to themselves for a month which allows them to show a wide range of pictures and each month another artist moves in.”

Artist Veronica Ongaro will exhibit her linocuts inspired by nature’s colour, shapes and patterns in a show from July 1-28. Workshops include How to Make a Rag Rug on July 3, Make a Wire Hen on July 4, and The Buzz about Pollinators on July 12 includes a walk around the garden with

Vanessa to show how vital pollinators are and includes mead and honey tasting.

The gardens, plant nursery and tearoom are open between 1pm and 5pm every Wednesday and Friday and on the first and third Saturday and Sundays of each month, until September 30.

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