

FEATURES

Voice writer and ecologist Alex Morss urges readers to get their fingers wet this spring if they want to watch wildlife surge into their garden

THAT old saying, if you build it they will come, works with ecosystems too: if you add water, they will rush in, stay and multiply. Water is the greatest bringer of life in any garden. There are few better ways to rocket up your street's wildlife value than to add a thoughtfully-designed garden water feature.

One of the most satisfying wildlife rewards is seeing how, as if by magic, endless tiny creatures rapidly find their way to your new garden pond.

Spring is a great time to get busy making your wild wonder, as you won't have to wait long to see results. (See box for advice). Each new pond helps to reverse a worrying trend. Conservation charity Buglife, which has been working on creating community wildlife areas in South Bristol, has warned that freshwater habitats are in peril, with their wildlife losses occurring faster than in marine or land habitats.

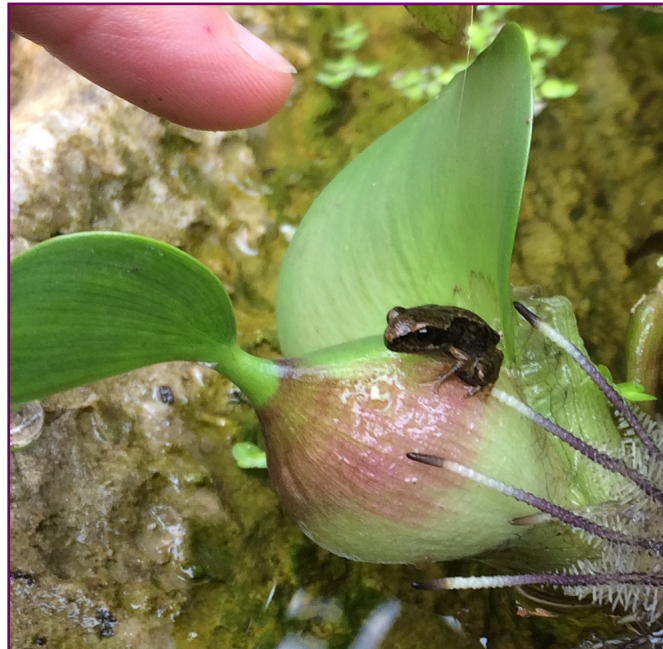
The charity says ponds are a lifeline for up to 10 per cent of all known species. In Britain, at least 3,800 different types of British invertebrates rely on freshwater for at least part of their life cycle – not to mention birds, amphibians, some reptiles and mammals.

Even a modest garden pond will bring you the awe of watching dragonflies, mayflies, damselflies, pond skaters, water boatmen, leeches, bloodworms, water fleas, caddisfly larvae, diving beetles, whirligig beetles, pond snails, water shrimps and back swimmers.

Mini-beast hunting is not just a right of children. I'd encourage all ages to go dipping and enjoy the free entertainment waiting for you below the water line – plants, algae, predators, herbivores, decomposers, fascinating parasites and their mind-blowing ecology.

Expect to enjoy a long season of pollinators and dragonflies dive bombing your beautiful pond flowers if you've planned

Make a pond – and watch as wildlife starts to take it over



Hopped in: A tiny froglet emerges from a back garden pond in Greville Road, Southville, photographed by Voice reader Sarah Metcalfe

them carefully, along with a flurry of thirsty, bathing birds, a spring chorus of frogs, and perhaps even newts and toads if you are lucky. Two of Britain's three newt species – common and palmate – are common locally.

By night, particularly if you switch off the lights, you might get visits from at least half a dozen local species of hungry bats that forage on the extra insects found around ponds. And it is likely to attract hedgehogs from the thriving local

population that we know lives here, thanks to the Voice and Avon Wildlife Trust appeal over the last two years.

Hedgehogs will love waddling into the shallows if you've created a small garden entrance for them such as a gap or hole in a wall or fence. They can swim, but remember to make sloping sides to your water feature, with shallow, easy access in and out so that the hogs, birds and amphibians don't get trapped when they pay your pond a visit. tinyurl.com/rspbMakeAPond

BEST POND AND BOG PLANTS FOR WILDLIFE

Some alien pond plants have become a life-threatening menace to wildlife after spreading into the wild. Sticking to these natives is a safer bet:

Submerged oxygenators Hair grass *Eleocharis acicularis*, hornwort *Ceratophyllum demersum*, water crowfoot *Ranunculus aquatilis*, water milfoil *Myriophyllum spicatum*, slender club rush *Isolepis cernua*, waterlily *Nymphaea*.

Floating plants Frogbit *Hydrocharis morsus-ranae*, Amphibious bistort *Persicaria amphibia*.

Emergent plants Greater pond-sedge *Carex riparia*, dwarf reed mace *Typha minima*, branched bur-reed *Sparganium erectum*, flowering rush *Butomus umbellatus*, water forget-me-not *Myosotis scorpioides*, water mint *Mentha aquatica*, water plantain *Alisma plantago-aquatica*, water avens *Geum rivale*, yellow flag *Iris pseudacorus*.

Marginal plants Angelica *Angelica sylvestris*, brooklime *Veronica beccabunga*, common fleabane *Pulicaria dysenterica*, lady's smock *Cardamine pratensis*, marsh marigold *Caltha palustris*, purple loosestrife *Lythrum salicaria*, ragged robin *Lychnis flos-cuculi*.

YOUR OWN WATER GARDEN

HOW TO MAKE A POND

- 1. Site** Sunny sites are best. But a shady pond will suffer less with duckweed and algae.
- 2. Shape** Dig a hollow, fill with soft sand to protect the liner. You can buy pond moulds, but a big bowl, old bath or sink in the ground also works.
- 3. Depth** Make habitat zones of varying depth. At least 60cm depth in part should stop it freezing solid in winter and provide amphibians with somewhere to hibernate safely.
- 4. Zones** Create shelves to stand submerged pot plants on, and shallow areas with pebbles or bricks, and, ideally, a slope, because the water level will change.
- 5. Access** Amphibians, birds and hedgehogs need easy access, so create shallow margins.
- 6. Water** Rainwater is best; tap water has a higher chemical pH and additives such as chloramines and nitrates which are deadly to some insects.
- 7. Plants** Pond plants are vital for structure, cover, food, egg laying and oxygenation. Use floating aquatics, submerged oxygenators, emergent and marginal boggy plants. Native wild flowers attract, shelter and feed wildlife.
- 8. Fish?** Go for native fish such as minnows if you must, but remember that fish will eat frogs, toads, newts and the larvae of dragonflies and other pond insects. Better without.
- 9. Maintenance** Clear out leaves, or your pond will silt up, become overgrown and lose its wildlife.
- 10. Shelter** Many species need shelter close by, for part of their life cycle outside the pond – plants or logs.
- 11. Identification** The My Wild Bedminster iSpot website gives free expert help to identify wildlife visiting your pond.
- 12. Records** Make notes when wildlife arrives, and record it online – at BRERC, BTO Garden Birdwatch, PondNet, Froglife or BWARs.
- 13. No pond?** Then help the spring toad patrols that happen across Bristol about now – look on Facebook. Or join a pond or river litter pick – there's one at the New Cut, on Saturday March 9: franc.org.uk/latest-news