

Wild Gardens Competition 2022

Sunday 18th September saw the judging of the Wild Gardens competition, run by Ventnor Town Council and the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust. Town councilors Stephen Cockett and Julie Hutchison went to visit 4 gardens entered into the competition. Stephen and Julie had no expectations of the morning that lay ahead, but by lunchtime had learned something new.

The first garden visited was owned by Fred, who has lived in his property for 12 years. We were greeted with a warm smile from Fred, and a collected knowledge of wild plants, insects, and creatures. Wild pollinating plants had taken seed all over his garden in various locations. Fred generously shared his knowledge of which plants transplant well and which ones work better from seed. many desirable plants are left to go to seed.

Fred showed us the 'circular labyrinth', a series of 30cm pathways cut through the grass. He explained that by cutting in pathways, moths, and butterflies flourish as they can feed and be protected by the tall grass. A few years ago, in that area of the garden, Fred was able to use a moth lamp that a friend had loaned to him, identifying over 300 different species. Moth numbers are in sharp decline, and it was really interesting to hear Fred speak about the care he gives to encourage the wildlife in his garden. Asked how Fred was able to identify so many moths, he said he has collected many books on the subject. He has friends who also share his interest.

Also present in Fred's garden is a wildlife pond. The drought this year had seen water levels be significantly depleted, but Fred did not want to add tap water to the pond because it would affect the natural balance of wildlife in there. Birds and dragonflies are frequent visitors to the pond. Fred has built dormouse boxes around his garden to ensure their safety.

There are open areas and shaded areas, each area is home to a range of different natural plants. Piles of wood are abundant, housing many insects over the winter months.

Every year, Fred collects tree saplings that have seeded around his garden and gives them away on Wightbay and to neighbours, these include bird cherries, hazel, and ash. He is careful when he does cut grass, and now does this by hand, so that he doesn't damage saplings.

"It's easy to be wild" is Fred's quote on his garden. He spends very little, and it is clear that Fred will never stop learning about the diversity that is flourishing on his back doorstep. Stephen and Julie left Fred's feeling inspired by Fred's Garden. With so many nooks and crannies, it's a haven for wildlife and diversity.

Next up, we visited Gaynor, with an infectious spirit of protecting the creatures in her garden.

Gaynor has lived at her garden flat for the last year. She has transformed her garden, from what was nothing, just rocks and patches of grass, into a hedgehog paradise. Gaynor showed us photos of how it was before, and the change is remarkable.

She started by looking at the plants on the Downs. Knowing it is illegal to take plants from that area, she went to talk to local resident and the gardener Mark Outlaw about the wild plants he has grown from seed. Mark shared some wild seeds, and this was what Gaynor started her garden with. She showed us a pink mallow that she re-seeded 3 times this year, attracting many bees.

Gaynor's neighbours have an area of densely growing blackberries next door. When it was discovered that a hedgehog lives in there, the area has been left because hedgehogs and their habitats are protected. A walkway exists between the neighbours garden and Gaynor's, and Gaynor leaves water and food out. The hedgehog turned out to be a female and had 4 babies this year. Every evening, mum and her babies go for a walk and can travel for up to 3 miles between gardens.

Gaynor grows lots of plants in tyres, she does this because tyres leave lots of hiding places for slugs and snails, at dusk, she collects them from around the tyres in her garden and leaves them in locations so that the hedgehogs can come and eat them.

Birds of all shapes and sizes visit the garden, the larger birds are fed once a day from the shed roof. A pair of blackbird residents can feed from the ground with the cat kept inside, so that they are safe. In the far corner of the garden lives a tortoise, which has a big netted 'cage' overhead to protect him from large predatory birds. She discovered this year that small birds come to visit the garden and they fly into that area, often drinking from trumpet shaped flowers. The tortoise gets moved to a larger patch of grass in the afternoon where he gets his exercise. One of the baby hedgehogs has moved into a box where the tortoise lives, and they have slow worms there now too. Gaynor phoned the hedgehog protection experts and asked if this was safe for all the creatures and they said yes. Gaynor is very careful to check with others if she is not sure, only wanting the best for the animals that live in her garden.

This year she has re-positioned bird boxes to ensure robins and blue tits are in the best places around her garden. She has a frog that lives in a water habitat at the top of the garden. Damselflies live around the water, and then sun themselves on the sweet peas that climb up the fence.

Gaynor prefers to spend time in the garden than being indoors. All of her plants are healthy, she has 6 water butts dotted around, and collects rainwater from every available space that she can. Even with that amount of water, her garden still suffered during the drought, but within 3 days of rain, much of the colour returned. She leaves dead stems in place as insects live in them in the winter months. The sunflowers are left in place until they dry out and are fed to the birds.

There's a sense of harmony and thoughtfulness in this garden. Gaynor sees all species of plant as necessary for the health of plants, insects and creatures, nothing goes to waste. The compost heap attracts the slugs, and the hedgehogs are well fed and healthy too.

"I just wish people knew that all it takes is a handful of wildflower seeds, some water for the birds, and a compost heap for vegetable scraps, to help wildlife wherever you are," said Gaynor.

The next garden we visited belonged to Pete. Pete has lived in his present house for 4 years, downsizing from over a 2-acre garden to a much smaller cottage garden.

Pete and his wife spend much time outside. They have chosen to grow their garden in pots which they brought with them when they moved house. Great care is taken over their plants, their garden houses plants that have been bought for them for special anniversaries that have bloomed.

Pete's garden is small but full of interest. He is inspired by the plants that are at the cascades in Ventnor. Colour fills the garden from pretty flowers and a vibrant turquoise summerhouse, adorned with colourful garden lights. Butterflies, lizards and hover flies enjoy spending time in Pete's Garden too.

This year saw the addition of a water tub. Pete filled it with tap water letting the chlorine levels drop for a few days before adding pond weed and a water lily bought from the garden centre. The pond has provided water for blackbirds visiting the garden. A friend gave Pete some of their pond water to add to it, and he is monitoring his new pond for signs of life.

The benefit of having plants in pots for Pete and his wife, is that they can (mostly) easily be moved. Often, Pete has moved a pot, followed by moving another, and within 2 hours the garden can be transformed.

Having a smaller garden has given Pete and his wife more time to have leisure time and to go to the beach. *"Having a tiny garden gives you more time to do other things,"* said Pete.

The last garden belonged to Pat and Ian.

We were greeted with a welcoming smile and an introduction to the emperor Tree that sits outside the front of their house. Pat lives nearby to Fred and discovered that one particular moth is enamoured with the blossoms produced by the tree. Bird boxes had been placed around the garden for blue tits and robins, and squirrels are sometimes seen in the hazel tree.

Inspired by Japanese gardens and plants, Pat has used rocks and logs to create borders and areas, the logs are naturally rotting down to create insect habitats. Pat takes great pride in not spending money in the garden by saving seeds and swapping plants. Rocks are covered

in moss in shaded areas of the garden, rocks house solitary bees. Ferns and Japanese anemones cover the ground.

Bees are everywhere in Pat's Garden. There is a shaded area beneath some trees where she hangs a hammock in the summer months. Small birds find shelter from the heat of the sun and the area is tranquil and cool.

Fruit is grown in her garden, which she passes to her neighbour who makes a low sugar jam, which is then shared. Pat makes her own compost, which she adds to the vegetable patch every November and then covers up. In spring, Pat plants seeds directly into the vegetable beds and covers them with the top half of a plastic bottle. This allows the seedlings to grow without the need for further watering. When the seedlings reach about 4 inches, she removes the bottles.

Pat is resourceful and creative in her approach to gardening. She finds interesting rocks and logs making good use of them. A couple of times a year, she uses her woodchipper to shred branches that have been pruned, and the wood chippings are used as a ground covering. No chemicals are used, and the garden is very healthy.

Pat gets all of her exercise in the garden. She remembers speaking with colleagues about gym membership years ago and would tell them not to bother with a gym because a garden is all the exercise you need. Being outdoors, growing food and helping nature brings a lot of joy to Pat.

"Don't bother with the gym or the garden centre, share and swap plants and seeds" is Pat's advice.

We finished the morning inspired by the conversations we'd had. We were shown how it doesn't matter how much space you have, gardens can be imaginatively created and cared for, feeding insects, creatures, and ourselves. All of the gardeners enjoyed the sense of calm that gardening and being outdoors gave them.

Ventnor Town Council thank Maggie Nelmes for suggesting the competition, and the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust for publicising the competition. We aim to run the competition again next year, with the judging happening towards the end of May so that the gardens by then are in full swing. In 2023 the competition will grow; this was a beautiful seed sown this year to inspire further blossoming next year.

We give thanks to Lesley's Nutshell and to Ventnor Botanic Gardens for generously donating prizes.



