



# GO WILD!

Wildlife gardens ...  
if you build them, they will come

Story: Jacki Brown

Inviting wildlife into your garden is a good way to experience nature in your everyday life and do something positive for biodiversity and the environment.

It may take a change in the way you think about gardens and nature, but it is a chicken-and-egg situation: changing the way you do things can change the way you think about things, so you don't need to know all the answers before you start to act.

The best way to create a wildlife garden is holistically. Think of the people around you, the environment, the costs and the future as well as your own enjoyment (which can be hugely enhanced by having — and sharing — your own piece of nature).

So why should you have a wildlife garden in your own back (or front) yard? The main reason is the same reason people have pets or go on holidays: the relaxation and enjoyment people get from living things and natural spaces. Imagine how relaxing it would be to have nature surrounding your own home.

Not only that, but wildlife gardens are always changing and moving, so you can watch as events unfold around you, such as frogs breeding in your pond or birds feeding in your trees. You can get to know the wildlife as you would a conventional pet like a cat or dog (without having to toilet train or take them to puppy school).

Another great reason is to improve the biodiversity of your local area. This means more creatures have more places to live and more things to eat, so they will survive in our human-centric world.

Aesthetically, wildlife gardens can be made to suit your own tastes. You don't need it to look like a "bush garden".

The kinds of creatures you might end up with in your fauna-friendly garden include birds, lizards, frogs, fish, dragonflies, butterflies, echidnas, possums and other marsupials. It will, of course, depend on the area you live in and how much bushland or vegetation is nearby. Even in the middle of



suburbia, you'll be surprised what kind of animals will arrive if you create habitat and food.

In inner-city areas, you might just attract winged things that can get from your place to their next rest or snack stop. Gardens also attract insects and if you encourage biodiversity by using a range of plant species and not using chemicals, you shouldn't have any single type of bug in plague proportions.

But how do you go about creating a wildlife wonderland? The first thing to do is put yourself in the shoes of a little critter: how do they get around, what's to eat, where can they sleep and hide from predators and what things do we humans have around that could be harmful to them?

Wildlife gardens need to provide pathways for creatures to get around, not just across the landscape, but up and down between layers of vegetation as well. One of the main reasons exotic birds out-compete our small native birds is the lack of shrub layers in a lot of gardens. Exotic birds such as mynahs like open spaces like lawns and paving to get around on and don't have to worry about predators. Our small native birds, however, like to stay hidden in foliage.

Most of our native animals, in fact, like to be protected and sheltered, so it's vital to provide shelter in a wildlife garden. This can be in the form of living plants of varying heights and textures, but you can also include logs, dead sticks and branches as well as manmade items such as bricks or tiles, for habitat hideouts.

You can also provide food in the form of plants, particularly local native species, and a source of water, such as a pond or water feature. Ponds at ground level attract frogs, while raised water features such as bird baths with some protection from the open will encourage the small native birds.

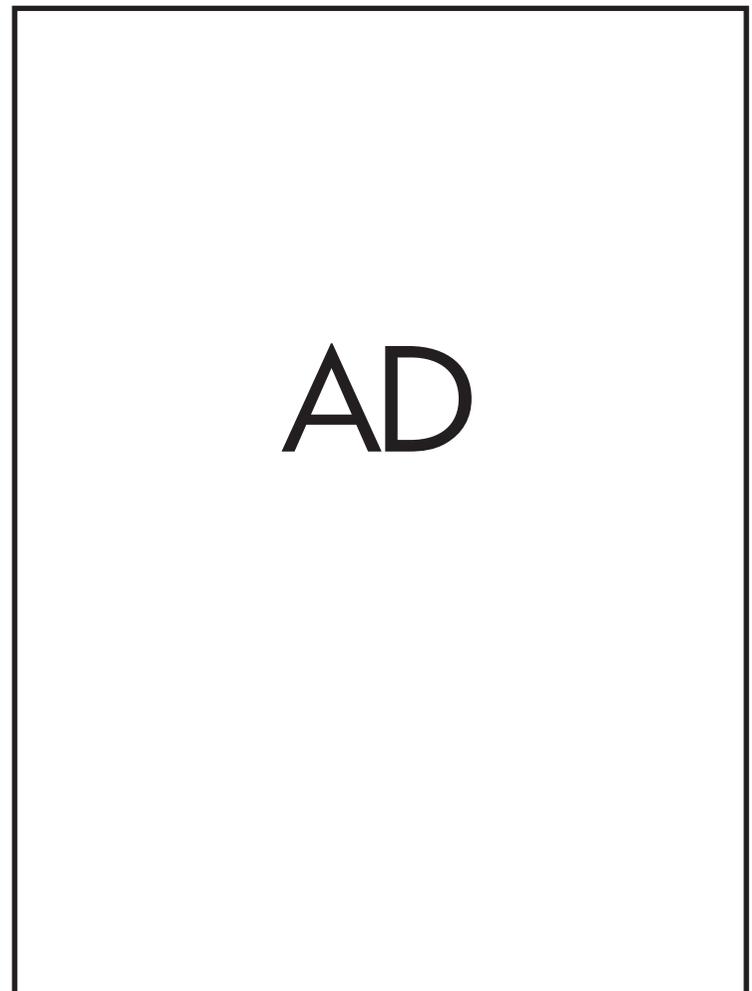
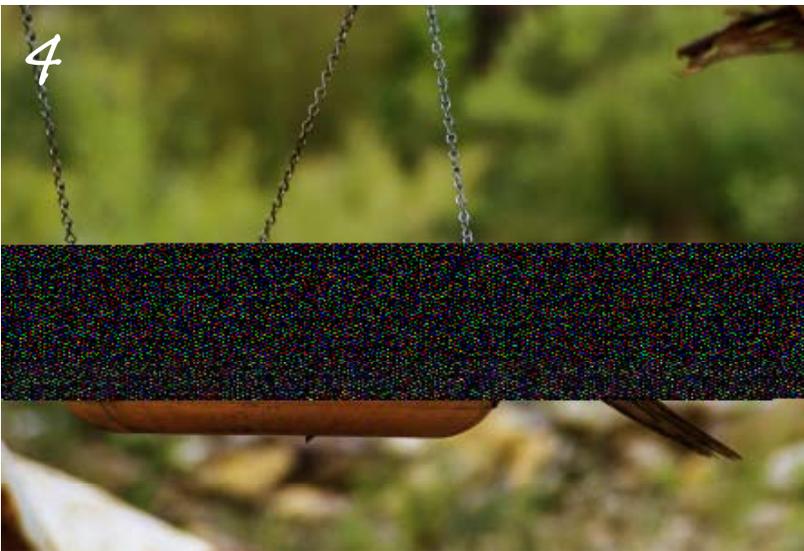
Think about what the land looked like before development and try to return your garden area to a similar condition — using locally native plants as much as possible and perhaps re-creating natural water courses. Be creative about ways you can redesign what you already have to suit the new purpose of habitat and also about ways you can enjoy and interact with the wildlife visitors.



Create barriers or buffer zones for places you want to discourage fauna from going into, such as roads, sheds, car parking areas and indoors. This could be achieved with fences or simply with a maintained bare area such as paving, pebbles or lawn.

It's a good idea to inform any cat owners in the neighbourhood about what you are trying to do and encourage them to keep their cats indoors. Other pets might also scare away any curious critters. Try to keep your domestic pets away from any area you intend to turn into a wildlife habitat; also keep them away from any bushland that borders your property.

There's a few things people sometimes dislike about the idea of having wildlife in their gardens. The main ones are "danger" and →



1. In a habitat garden you need to have layered planting, lots of nooks, crannies and outcrops, and a ready supply of clean water.
2. Lizards such as the blue tongue like to spend much of their time on the ground or close to it, feeding on insects found in leaf litter.
3. Artificial bird breeding boxes and shelters can encourage birds into your garden and provide them with a refuge from domestic pets.
4. Although putting out store-bought bird seed is not recommended for native birds, a bird feeder can help birds through leaner times.
5. To encourage native birds into your garden, provide them with plenty of tree cover and plants that form part of their natural diet.

## wildlife gardens

“mess”. Won’t there be snakes and spiders and other dangerous creatures in a wildlife garden? There will be spiders and other insects, but the more you observe them, the more you realise they’re not interested in hunting down humans — they’re too busy going about their own lives and trying to catch food.

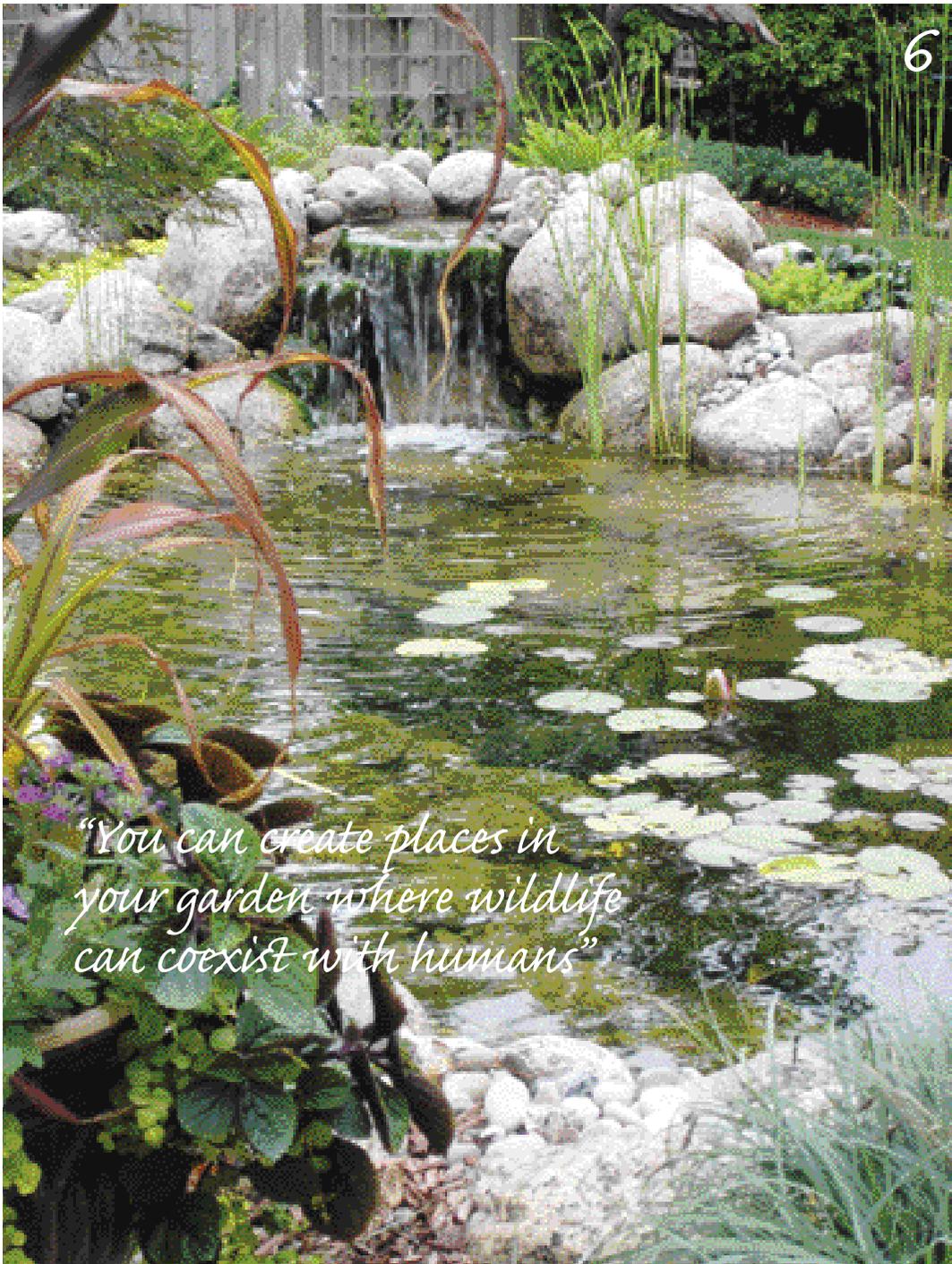
It’s a similar story with snakes, though it’s less likely there will be snakes in most residential areas, with the exception of bushland or rural areas. When wild animals come into humans’ living spaces, it’s because they are looking for food, water or shelter that they haven’t been able to find outside. So providing habitat and water in your garden is more likely to keep animals in the outdoor spaces.

You may not even see most of the wildlife at first, and half the fun is being in the right place when an animal decides to venture out. (The other half is re-enacting an echidna

waddling through your garden when you tell friends about it!)

People often don’t want their gardens to look messy, preferring to keep things neat. The trick is to start seeing the beauty in random placement, natural patterns and disorder. This is how it happens in nature and most people agree there’s something beautiful and peaceful about the wilderness that can’t be re-created in your conventional garden.

A couple of other concerns that sometimes stop people from considering a wildlife garden are the use of water and the noise some animals make. With the right plant selection, utilising plenty of native plants, the garden shouldn’t require any more water than any other. You could even save water, electricity and money by converting a rarely used pool into a pond for wildlife and aquatic plants, which the residents of one council



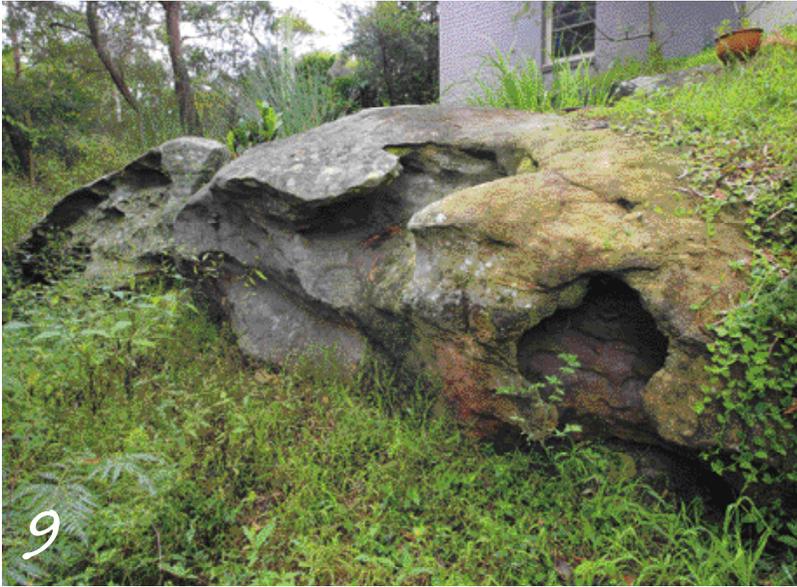
*“You can create places in your garden where wildlife can coexist with humans”*

**6.** A naturally balanced pond, such as this masterpiece from Waterscapes Australia ([www.waterscapesaustralia.com.au](http://www.waterscapesaustralia.com.au)), will be an asset.

**7.** If you don’t have a pond, a birdbath can keep birds cool in summer. Just make sure it isn’t too deep and it’s in a protected spot.

**8.** Native plants have a vital role to play in the wildlife garden. Choose indigenous species that are known to be bird-attracting.

**9.** Some animals are shy, so have plenty of places where they can feel safe and escape from the elements. A natural rock formation is ideal.



## Wildlife friendly tips

- Don't use chemicals — they're harmful all the way up the food chain, including for humans. Replace fertilisers with compost and manures and let natural predators take care of bug infestations.
- Include plants, especially natives, that will provide food to different animals throughout the year.
- Provide shelter in the form of layers of planting as well as artificial nest boxes and shelters.
- In general it's best not to put out food or seeds for native animals — it's better for them to find their own food.
- Have several water sources throughout your wildlife garden and locate them at different levels.
- Enjoy the company of your new furry, scaly, feathered friends!

Creating a functioning, bio-diverse ecosystem in your garden is a gradual and continuous process, but the result is a relaxing, pleasant natural space to be in — and perhaps even a new way of looking at nature and life.

Whether you have a small space or expanses of farmland, you can create places in your garden where wildlife can coexist with humans. It might take a change of philosophy or outlook before you take the necessary steps to share your space with the local fauna, but all in all it's very rewarding to see the fruits of your labour being eaten by creatures, both great and small, in your own backyard. Not only will you get personal satisfaction, but you'll be improving the environment for other people and animals into the future.

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area in northern Sydney are doing in increasing numbers. (For more information, turn to page 110). There's no need to top up the water because nature adapts to seasonal rainfall differences and, of course, you no longer need the filter running, nor any pool maintenance.

There are some noisy party animals that ruin it for everyone — isn't it always the way? Certain species, like possums and frogs, get a bad rap for the noise they make, but knowing what attracts them can work in your favour because it means you can attract them to a distant point in your garden, well away from bedrooms and living spaces. Some bushland council areas have started building "possum bridges", made of rope, across roads where possums habitually cross — why not build a possum bridge across an area of your roof that possums use as a thoroughfare?

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