

TOOLKIT

BIODIVERSITY AT HOME

This toolkit has a focus on fauna and includes simple actions for staff, families and communities who want to take action to improve biodiversity.

Background

Northern Ireland's wildlife is in trouble. Around one in nine (12%) of native species assessed here are threatened with extinction, [making NI one of the most nature-depleted parts of the world](#). Once-familiar garden visitors are all becoming harder to spot. Rural populations of the hedgehog have declined by between [a third and three-quarters since 2000](#), the starling is now UK red-listed after a sharp fall [in breeding numbers since the 1960s](#), and the small tortoiseshell butterfly had its worst year on record across all four regions of the UK in 2024, [with numbers in Northern Ireland crashing 84% in a single year](#). [Pollinators are under particular pressure](#). Roughly one third of Ireland's 99 wild bee species are threatened with extinction, mainly because there is less food and fewer safe places to nest in our landscape.

Yet the actions we take outside our front doors – in gardens, on balconies, on windowsills and in our wider communities – can make a real and measurable difference.

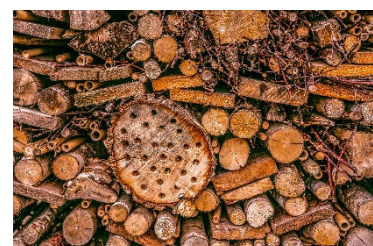
[Ulster Wildlife](#) notes that gardens in Northern Ireland collectively cover more land than all of our nature reserves put together, and across Great Britain the latest mapping plots 25.8 million gardens covering 959,800 hectares -

over three times the area of the [UK's National Nature Reserves](#). If even a fraction of these becomes a little wilder and a little more welcoming, it builds a network of stepping stones that allows wildlife to move, feed and breed. No garden, balcony or window box is too small to count.

About this toolkit

This toolkit is for staff who want to take what their employer is doing for biodiversity at the workplace and extend it into their own everyday lives and will cover:

- Why home action matters and how it links to work
- Plants and pollinators: the simple changes with the biggest impact
- Helping garden birds, hedgehogs and other visitors
- Spreading the word: family, friends and community
- Recording wildlife and pledging your space
- A quick-start checklist



Why home action matters and how it links to work

[For most of us, home is where a lot of life happens](#), and the choices we make in that space – [what we plant, how often we mow, whether we use chemicals](#), what we feed the birds – have a direct effect on local wildlife. UK gardens collectively cover 959,800 hectares - over three times the area of all our National Nature Reserves - and already host more than half of the [UK's butterfly, amphibian and reptile species, and over 40% of bird species](#). When workplaces and homes pull in the same direction, the results add up: [a workplace pollinator zone is far more useful when staff are also creating pollinator-friendly patches](#) on the way home and in the streets where they live, because gardens function as an interconnected network rather than isolated patches. Ulster Wildlife's 'Let Nature In' campaign, which is encouraging at least [5,000 households across Northern Ireland to take action](#), makes this point well: small actions, multiplied across a community, become a serious contribution to nature's recovery.



Plants and pollinators: the simple changes with the biggest impact

If you do nothing else after reading this toolkit, plant flowers that feed pollinators and stop using pesticides. [These two actions, alone, transform a garden](#).

- [Plant pollinator-friendly herbs](#) and flowers across the seasons – rosemary, thyme, marjoram, lavender, chives, foxgloves, honeysuckle, clover.
- Take part in [Plantlife's No Mow May and the wider No Mow Movement](#) – leave all or part of your lawn uncut from May onwards. Roughly 97% of the UK's flower-rich meadows have been lost since the 1930s, so any patch of long grass and wildflowers helps.
- [Drop the pesticides](#) and slug pellets – they kill the insects pollinators (and hedgehogs) feed on.
- [Leave a patch of bare earth in a sunny spot](#). Around 80% of Ireland's solitary bees are 'mining bees' that nest in the ground.

Helping garden birds, hedgehogs and other visitors

Garden birds

With many species in decline, food, water and safe places to nest are the three things that make the biggest difference.

- [Provide a mix of foods through the year](#): sunflower hearts, nyjer for finches, mealworms in spring. Pause filling peanut and seed feeders from May to October – recent RSPB advice is that disease (trichomonosis) spreads more easily on feeders in summer and autumn, so switch to small amounts of suet or mealworms over those months.

- When you do put peanuts out, only [use a rigid steel-mesh feeder](#) (loose peanuts can choke fledglings) and only buy peanuts that are guaranteed aflatoxin-free.
- Clean feeders and bird baths weekly with hot soapy water to prevent disease.
- Always provide fresh water, especially in hard frosts and hot dry spells.
- [Put up nest boxes suited to the species you want to help](#): open-fronted (low and concealed in vegetation) for robins and wrens, 25mm-hole for blue, coal and marsh tits, 32mm-hole for great tits, house sparrows and nuthatches, swift boxes high under the eaves,
- Avoid putting feeders too close to dense cover where cats can ambush, and not too far from cover so birds can dart to safety.

Hedgehogs

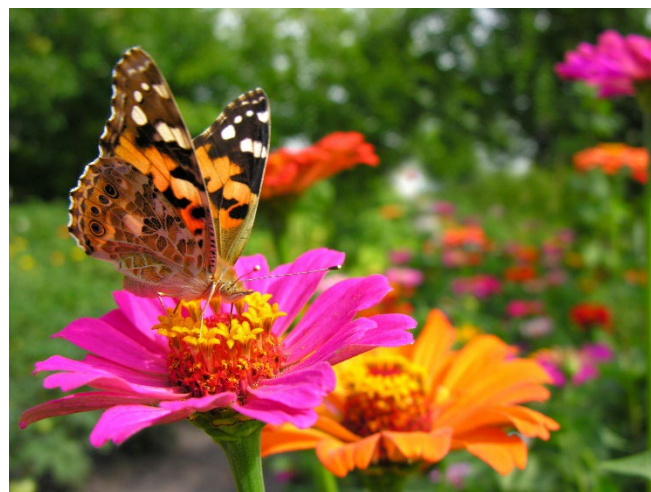
Hedgehog populations have collapsed in recent decades – [over half lost from the countryside since 2000](#), and a third of urban sites no longer have them, although urban numbers are stabilising. They need to roam over a wide area each night, so the single most useful thing you can do is to cut a 13cm by 13cm 'hedgehog highway' at the bottom of your fence – about the size of a CD case, [big enough for a hedgehog but too small for most pets – and ask your neighbours to do the same](#).

Other actions:

- Leave a wild corner with leaf litter, a log pile or a purpose-built hedgehog house in a sheltered, undisturbed spot.
- Check long grass carefully before strimming.
- Cover drains and ponds with sloping sides or [a ramp so hedgehogs can climb out if they fall in](#).
- [Never use slug pellets](#) – hedgehogs that eat poisoned slugs are themselves poisoned.
- [Put out fresh water and meaty cat or dog food](#), or specialist hedgehog food (never bread, never milk – hedgehogs are lactose-intolerant, and mealworms can cause bone disease) if you regularly see a hedgehog and want to support it.

Add water

Water is one of the highest-impact additions to any garden. A pond – even a sunken washing-up bowl or an old Belfast sink – [will quickly attract frogs, newts, dragonflies, drinking birds and bathing hedgehogs](#). Make sure at least one side slopes gently or has stones piled up so creatures can climb out. No fish: they will eat the very things you are trying to attract. If a pond is not possible, a shallow dish of water topped up daily is better than nothing, especially in summer.



Make homes

- Bug hotels can be as fancy or as rough as you like. A simple stack of bamboo canes, hollow stems and old pallets in a sheltered, sunny spot will be colonised by [solitary bees](#), ladybirds and lacewings. The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan cautions against the very large commercial bee hotels, which can

spread disease and attract predators – keep yours no bigger than an average blue-tit bird box and position it 1.5–2m off the ground, facing south or south-east.

- [Bee bricks or drilled blocks of untreated wood](#) (holes 2–10mm wide, 10cm deep) make excellent solitary bee nests.
- [A log pile in a damp, shady corner provides for beetles](#), fungi, woodlice and the things that eat them.

Spreading the word: family, friends and community

Individual gardens become a real network only when neighbours join in. Most of the actions in this toolkit cost very little to share, and many people will do them once they understand why.

Start with your own household

- Get children involved in building a bug hotel, a bird feeder or a bee-friendly window box. The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan publishes a free Junior Pollinator Plan you can download and [work through together](#).
- Talk about why you're doing it. 'I'm letting that corner grow long because the bees need it' is a more useful sentence than people realise.

Talk to neighbours

- [Coordinate hedgehog highways](#) along a row of gardens – a single gap helps far less than a connected route.
- If your street has grass verges or a shared green, ask the council or housing association whether part of it could be managed as a pollinator zone with reduced mowing.
- Share cuttings, divisions and seeds. A passed-on rosemary plant is more likely to be cherished than a bought one.

Get involved in your community

- [Ulster Wildlife](#), the RSPB and the Woodland Trust all offer volunteering opportunities across Northern Ireland, from coppicing days to dawn-chorus surveys.
- Tidy Towns groups, residents' associations and schools are often looking for help with planting and maintenance. [The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan](#) publishes specific guidance for community groups, schools and faith communities, all free to download.
- Talk to your child's school about what they are doing for wildlife on the school grounds – many schools in NI have received funding to plant pollinator beds and put up bird and bat boxes, and parental enthusiasm makes a difference.



Recording wildlife and pledging your space

What gets counted gets cared for. [Recording the wildlife that visits your patch](#) gives conservation bodies the data they need to track changes and target their work. It is also genuinely enjoyable – many people find that paying close attention to a patch of garden reveals far more life than they imagined.

Citizen science you can join

- [RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch](#) – an hour of bird counting in late January, the world's largest garden wildlife survey ([rspb.org.uk – Big Garden Birdwatch FAQs](#)).
- [BTO Garden BirdWatch](#) – a year-round bird and garden-wildlife recording scheme run by the British Trust for Ornithology, going since 1995,
- [Butterfly Conservation's Big Butterfly Count](#) – a 15-minute count in high summer (mid-July to early August).
- [Ulster Wildlife sightings](#) – submit your records of barn owls, red squirrels, hedgehogs and other priority species directly to the local conservation team.
- [Actions for Pollinators](#) – the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan's online map. Draw a polygon around your garden, list what you have done, and add yourself to a network of pollinator-friendly spaces across the island.

Pledge your garden

Both Ulster Wildlife's '[Let Nature In](#)' campaign and the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan's '[Pledge Your Garden for Pollinators](#)' scheme allow you to register your space (no matter how small) as

wildlife-friendly. You receive seasonal advice and tips, and your garden becomes a visible part of a growing network. Both are free to join, and signing up is usually less than five minutes online.

Quick-start checklist

If this all feels like a lot, here are five things you could do this month that would make a real difference:

1. Plant one pot, window box or border with pollinator-friendly herbs (rosemary, thyme, marjoram, lavender).
2. [Stop mowing](#) one corner of your lawn (or your whole lawn) until late summer.
3. Put out a shallow dish of fresh water for birds, insects and hedgehogs.
4. Throw out the slug pellets and any garden chemicals you no longer need (take them to a household waste centre, not down the drain).
5. Sign up to [Ulster Wildlife's 'Let Nature In' campaign](#) and pledge your garden on the [All-Ireland Pollinator Plan map](#).

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