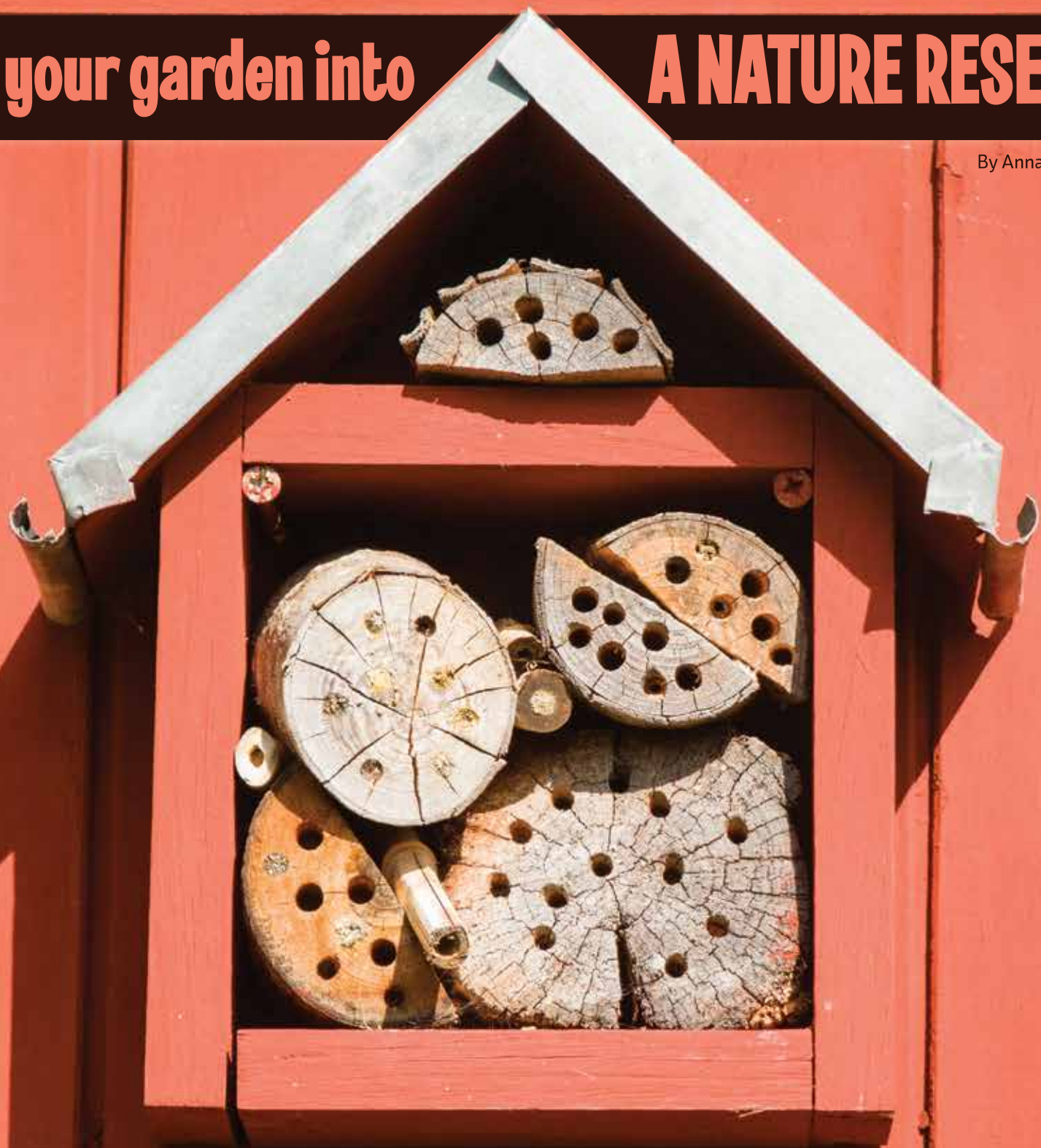


Turn your garden into

A NATURE RESERVE

By Anna Mouton



With five easy projects to attract wildlife

Some days it feels like all the news about nature is bad. We read about climate change and plastics in the ocean and how insects will be extinct within the next century. Depressing? You bet! But here at MARKtoe! we believe that everyone can make a difference. And this month we'll show you how you can help save the planet by creating a haven for wildlife in your own back garden. So get out your toolbox and read on.

1. Snug as a bug

Bees have become the poster children for declining insect populations. People value bees because they make honey and pollinate many of our crops. But other insects are equally important pollinators and serve as food for everything from chameleons to birds.

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We don't usually think about where these six-legged critters spend their resting hours. It turns out that insects need a place to lay their heads just as we do. They have to hide from predators and some require shelter during periods of dormancy. Others want a safe spot to lay their eggs. You can make life easier for them by constructing a bug hotel.



Bug hotels are structures designed to accommodate insects. They can be as simple as a piece of wood with holes drilled in it or an upside-down flowerpot filled with straw. Or they can be bigger and have multiple compartments catering to a range of species. The important thing is to ensure the rooms stay dry – no one likes a hotel with a leaky roof!

Solitary bees and many types of wasp will nest in holes drilled in wood. Typical hole sizes range from two to ten millimetres in diameter. Space the holes a couple of centimetres apart and drill as deep as you can without breaking through the other side of the wood. You can also bundle up some hollow bamboo stems or reeds to entice solitary bees. Bunches of twigs or straw offer shelter to hover-flies and ladybirds.

Insects aren't too fussy. Any dry crevice is a potential home: let your imagination run wild or have a look on Pinterest for inspiration.

2. Strictly for the birds

The housing crisis is not limited to humans: birds too are challenged by a shortage of nesting sites. We often feed garden birds but forget about providing them with places to raise their families. Our tendency to remove dead trees is a problem for those species that nest in cavities in wood, such as barbets, woodpeckers, hoopoes, and sparrows.

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Birds that naturally nest in cavities will happily accept a nesting log or box. You can buy or make these. Remember that a simple wooden nest box is best – resist the miniature replica of the Taj Mahal. Conspicuous accommodation attracts predators and boxes made of artificial materials or metal can overheat in summer. Condensation is also less likely in wooden boxes. Cavity nesters don't need a perch and their boxes shouldn't have them.



Mount the box or log at least two metres off the ground in a quiet spot that doesn't get direct sun. You improve your chances of luring breeding birds if you offer several options scattered around the garden. Don't have any suitable sites for a nest box or log? You can still help out birds by offering them nesting material. Grow some ornamental grasses and leave small twigs on the ground instead of clearing them away. Or try putting out strips of hessian or a handful of coir so birds can help themselves.



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3. Let's do lunch

You don't have to be an expert handyman to build a bird feeder. All you need is a piece of board and some eye screws. Sink a screw into each corner on one of the flat sides. Thread a piece of sturdy twine through the eyes and hang the feeder in a tree. Job done. Don't have a tree? Plant a post and fix the board on top. Use two nails or screws to secure your feeder or it will rotate.

Of course, if you are a handyman, you can improve the feeder by adding an edge to prevent food from falling off. You can also make more complicated feeders for serving fruit or suet balls. This is another opportunity to be creative or seek ideas on Pinterest. Anything from chipped teacups to old lanterns can turn into amazing bird feeders.

Position the bird feeder where it's easy to access and view – watching the birds is part of the fun – but not so close to a window that birds are at risk of flying into the glass. Be aware of predators such as cats and keep the feeder out of their reach. Feed in the mornings if you're concerned about attracting rodents: house-mice and undesirable rat species tend to be nocturnal.

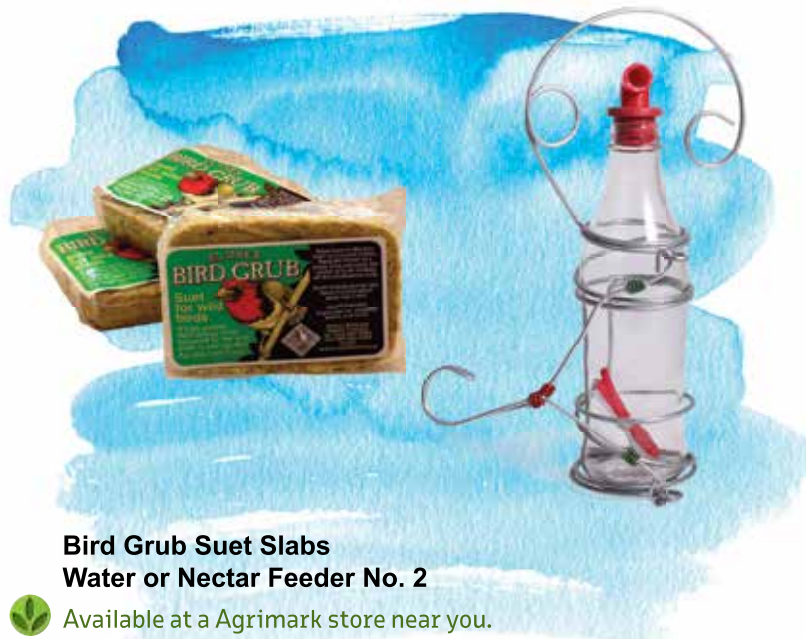
You can buy wild bird seed and suet balls from your local pet shop, garden centre or Agrimark. Wild-bird seed is preferable to other mixes because it includes fine seeds that tempt small birds like waxbills. Coarse mixes may limit your visitors to sparrows, weavers, doves and pigeons. Suet balls are so popular that you'll find them disappearing within hours! Grated cheese is another favourite: the Cape robin-chat – Janfrederik to his friends – will love you for it.

Before you rush out and set the table, a note of caution: not everything is suitable fare for birds. Avoid bread, raw meat, cookies, any food with added sugar or salt, and anything that can be labelled junk food. Stick with fresh fruit and the items mentioned above.



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Wild Bird Seed • 5kg

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You can make a simple stumpery by sawing dead logs or branches into even lengths and stacking them neatly in a corner. Or you can create a feature by planting logs upright in a line or spiral. Stumperies can resemble giant driftwood sculptures and add a dramatic element to a garden. So don't haul that dead tree away to the dump – unleash your inner artist on it instead.



4. Stir your stumps

Do you want a garden like the one at Highgrove House belonging to Prince Charles? You can make a start by installing a stumpery!

A stumpery is similar to a rockery except it's made from dead trees rather than stone. We have the Victorians to thank for the idea. They built stumperies to enjoy the beauty of weathered wood and so that they had a place to plant their fern collections. Today stumperies are appreciated because as fantastic wildlife habitats.

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In nature, dead wood is a resource for a host of wildlife including the cavity-nesting birds and solitary bees already discussed. There are beetles and flies that depend on rotting wood or the fungi growing on dead wood for their survival. Others use tree stumps as shelter. A stumpery will attract all of these creatures and provide a home to small animals such as toads and lizards.

5. A can of worms

Accommodating more wildlife in your garden is one way you can help protect the natural world. Another is to reduce the amount of waste you send to landfill. Many gardeners already compost their organic kitchen refuse. How about upping your game and starting a worm farm?

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A worm farm is basically a big container to hold bedding in which the worms live. The bedding can be anything from sawdust to shredded paper – but never soil. The worms in worm farms are called red wigglers and they differ from the earthworms you find in the garden. The container needs a tap at the base to drain off fluids. You feed the worms by sprinkling chopped kitchen waste on top of their bedding.

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Worms do best on a diet of fruit and veggie peels and trimmings with the odd helping of tea leaves or crushed egg shells. They don't want meat, fish, dairy, oils, or acidic foods like citrus. They also like moderate temperatures so stand your worm farm in a shady spot and cover it to keep out the rain.

A Google search will deliver several worm farm designs based on everyday containers like standard black plastic dustbins. You don't need advanced skills to make a functional worm farm. The liquid that you drain from the container is called worm tea and plants love it. Use it to boost the health of your houseplants or veggies.

So there you have it, five easy ways you can lend the planet a helping hand. All of these projects are perfect for kids and will encourage them to connect with nature. No need for expensive trips to the game reserve: you can enjoy a wealth of wildlife in your own backyard. 

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