

WILDLIFE GARDENING



Volunteer wildlife gardeners in action (Credit: George Barbour)

George Barbour, Devon Wildlife Trust's head volunteer gardener, has breathed new life into the charity's Cricklepit Mill garden. He's always looking for help. Just don't mention weeds.

How did you get involved?

The Trust advertised for a head volunteer gardener at the Cricklepit Mill HQ in Exeter. I already had a role on the helpdesk but jumped at the chance to work outdoors and lead a team.

What happens during a gardening session?

The Garden Group meets every Wednesday afternoon and starts with a walk-about to establish what needs doing and to allocate tasks. We also note any changes in the garden; it's particularly rewarding in spring when we spot the first primrose or celandine in flower. Tasks range from digging, planting and clearing excess growth to planning and establishing new plant-beds or features.

What have been the benefits?

The physical health benefits from garden work are obvious but mental health and well-being are less recognised. Engaging with a garden task means concentrating on the here and now which can displace anxieties. It's hard to put a value on a kingfisher fly-past but seeing the garden group beam with joy as a result, can only be good.

"I can't emphasise enough the rewards that come from working with others to a common purpose surrounded by nature"

Have there been any challenges?

Retiring early from teaching, I wanted something challenging! When I started the Mill garden was dominated by bindweed and looked uncared for. Several people offered suggestions but we lacked an overall plan or vision. I also had no volunteers to assist, but as time progressed many came forward and now six to eight turn up each week. A development plan which I devised now guides all we do.

Has anything surprising ever happened?

The relationship between group members is important. We break for tea - accompanied by cake which I prepare weekly - and have a friendly exchange of views, ideas and stories. I established the notion that we had no weeds, just plants that had a place in a wildlife garden: every time someone makes a reference to 'weeding', a 10p donation to funds is required. Most of us have been caught out at some stage!

How would you motivate others to get involved?

I would simply say, give it a go, you have nothing to lose and much to gain. You can develop friendships and new skills. I can't emphasise enough the rewards that come from working with others to a common purpose surrounded by nature.

More information

[Devon Wildlife Trust \(website\)](http://www.devonwildlifetrust.org.uk)

Call **Devon Wildlife Trust**: 01392 279244

More stories here: www.naturaldevon.org.uk