



Bathing beauties

Sir Roddy says that his bird bath provides far more entertainment than watching the television

IN THE centre of my lawn I have a bird bath, one of my favourite possessions that has followed me from house to house over the years. I do hope that it, like Tania and I, will never have to move again, as we feel we have at last found our Shangri-la.

Sometimes there's a fat pigeon sitting on the bird bath, sometimes a robin and sometimes a murmuration of starlings frolicking and bathing and chattering away. I love my bird bath for the entertainment it gives us, superior in almost every way to watching the TV. Every garden should contain some form of water. There is something spell-binding about wild life, which is why I am thinking of retaining my 'eco' pond which I inherited from the previous owners of the house. It is pretty hideous, however. In dry weather the black liner becomes exposed, there is a nasty green slime that keeps on coming back despite thorough cleanings from time to time, and dead grasses line the outside edge. But, it does everything an eco-pond should do. Its gentle ramp of small pebbles prevents the hedgehogs from drowning and gives birds somewhere to drink and bathe. I have avoided fish because they eat frog and toad spawn which, incidentally, is sucked in and mangled by water pumps that drive fountains.

I may choose to do away with my present pond but am determined to establish another and I may easily do so this in September, the best time of the year to build such a pond, although the best time to plant is in the spring. But how can I make it look more pleasing to the eye? This all boils down to the choice of plants, choosing waterside plants like Marsh Marigold (*Caltha palustris*) as well as other plants that thrive around the edge like astilbes and rodgersias and the low-growing knotweed *Persicaria affinis* 'Dimity'.

The biggest problem people have is how to hide the wrinkled edge of a flexible liner. The above mentioned will certainly help although the line can be tucked in under a



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brick or stone edging, or turf can be laid so that it runs down to the water's edge. Val Bourne, in her book *The Natural Gardener*, lists many other plants that also beckon wildlife to the garden. There are well over one million acres of garden in the UK. If we all introduced such plants, even one or two, we would certainly help to conserve our own natural ecology. As Val points out, "Since one in every eight plants in the world is threatened with extinction, we need to view our gardens as important mini-nature reserves, not neat garden rooms." If this does not appeal to you, then you could devote one part of the garden, a

corner perhaps, to soothe Mother Nature's brow. After all, she has had a lot to put up with during the chemical-orientated decades since World War 2.

Wildlife meadows are the perfect solution for people who find their gardens too large to cope with. Abandoned lawns that do not have couch or rye grass growing in them can make perfect sites for such a meadow. It is no coincidence that wild flowers proliferate on sites with poor soil: those are the conditions they prefer. If your top soil is rich and deep you will have to remove it, otherwise the grasses will swamp most of the inmates with the exception of ox-eye daisies. However, the more neat-minded gardener may not like having to leave browning plants until the end of August to allow seeds to ripen and self-sow. Neatly mown paths will help to make your wildlife meadow look more like an 'intended' garden.

You can read all the gardening books in the world but the best way to learn about plants is to grow them yourself. Having a chat with someone who has been gardening all their lives can prove equally as rewarding. I remember once

talking to a lady gardener who had always had a passion for herbaceous perennials. She told me that she found August the best month for lifting and dividing them. She was, of course, referring to herbaceous perennials that flower in early and mid-summer, pointing out that the soil was more easily worked at that time as opposed to September, a famously wet month. So long as you prepare the soil well before you plant and water them in thoroughly, they will have time to settle in before the colder weather arrives. And that is what I have been doing ever since, and with great success I may add. ■