



A bronze resin otter slithers onto the step of the waterfall that cascades into the wildlife-friendly pool below
INSET The path to Diane and Steve's house is lined with self-seeding plants

NATURE'S PARADISE

WITH ITS LILY-PAD PONDS AND BUG DENS, **DIANE POOLE'S** GARDEN IS A WILDLIFE HAVEN AND RELAXING RETREAT

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The garden that came with the three-bedroom post-war cottage that Diane Poole moved into with her husband Steve in 2007 was an unremarkable blank canvas – and these two keen gardeners were eager to stamp their mark on it. ‘We moved from a house with a small garden because we wanted to live deeper in the countryside and have a bigger plot,’ says Diane. ‘Both of us love gardening and we’ve inherited our passion from our parents.’

Diane's enthusiasm is evident the moment you set eyes on the house, with the front garden a riot of colour from wildflower



planting. ‘The mixed hedge on the left was overgrown but, with careful pruning, it now provides colour, berries for the birds and nesting opportunities,’ says Diane. ‘We’ve added to, and extended, the planting in the front border; we dug out a pond and we have a bed full of pollinator-friendly plants that flower throughout the summer.’

‘We’ve always struggled to get the grass to grow here so the lawn now has naturalised daffodils, and self-seeding plants, such as primroses and cowslips followed by ragged robin, scabious, red clover, betony and viper's bugloss. We've let

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
Two sculpted cranes
intertwine at the edge
of the main pond;
plants, including native
bonsai, are clustered
in a corner of the patio;
water collects in the
leaves of an undulating
sculpture; one of
several, well-visited
bug dens dotted
around the garden

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the gravel drive green-over with flowers, and planted a lavender border alongside the yew hedge.'

The back garden they inherited had been neglected but included a large lawn, some random flowerbeds, and a boundary edged with monster leylandii conifers – described in the *Collins Tree Guide* as 'the most planted and most hated garden tree'.

The trees blocked a lot of light – but two months after the couple moved in, fate took a hand and the conifers were blown down in a massive storm. 'It was lucky, but it cost a lot to have them cut up and taken away,' recalls Diane. 'There was also an overgrown leylandii hedge down the left-hand side of the garden which was dying back, so we infilled it with shrubs, including escallonia, euonymus, holly, and pyracantha – to create colour and provide berries for the wildlife,' says Diane.

The couple, who were both scientists before retiring, never had a master plan for the garden, so it has evolved naturally and organically. 'We wanted to create a design that would attract wildlife and also look attractive,' she says.

'And we wanted to be able to sit down and enjoy it.'

That is certainly no problem, because there are seats all around the garden in at least nine different spots in this third-of-an-acre plot, plus a little summerhouse, where the couple can sit and gaze at the fruits of their labour.

One of the key items Diane wanted to add was a 'decent-sized' pond, which was completed in 2009 and measures about 6m x 4m. Different varieties of waterlilies, such as native yellow fringe lily grow there, plus oxygenating plants like hornwort and elodea. Dragonflies are often seen on the tall stems of iris and blue pickerel weed – they emerge from their larval cases to dry their new wings before flying away.

'We've been visited by frogs, newts, mallards, moorhens, grey wagtails and other birds, as well as grass snakes,' says Diane. 'There's another pond at the back of the garden and a container pond by the greenhouse. The ponds are topped up with rainwater from the roof via holding tanks and pipes, to avoid introducing nutrients that promote algae.'

Diane has created three bug houses – two in the back garden and a new one in the front garden. Works of art and a triumph of upcycling, they are constructed from junk such as tiles, old bricks, bamboo, logs, twigs and straw. Inside, spiders, solitary bees, voles and even hedgehogs find shelter and seclusion.

'The front garden bug den has slanting holes for butterflies and hidey-holes for grass snakes, who also like the pile of dry leaves we've left nearby, covered with a corrugated lid,' says Diane, who runs the gardening group for Bookham Bees WI.

'When the group was here last autumn, we lifted the lid and there were two baby grass snakes inside. It was so exciting. We often visit each other's gardens for coffee, or tea and cake, and to swap plants. We also visit gardens, such as RHS Wisley, which is only a few miles away.'

There is badger activity from a sett across the road and Diane says they often see their footprints in the snow. 'We recently saw a kingfisher and, at night, bats and owls flit by. We like sitting outside, seeing what's there, which flowers come out and when, watching as the garden unfolds over the seasons.'

There is always colour from plants in spring and summer,



ABOVE A lichen-clad, apple tree overhangs the main pond in the back garden, fringed by water-loving plants, while a lawned path leads past the greenhouse towards the patio

LEFT Stocked with so many perennial plants and patches of wildflower areas, Diane, here taking a well-earned break, says that the large garden is relatively easy to maintain

berries in autumn and winter-flowering bulbs. And nothing is ever wasted; instead of deadheading the lavender, for instance, the seedheads are left in place to provide food for the birds during the colder months.

Dotted throughout the garden are wildlife sculptures – a bronze resin otter by the pond, a hare in the long grass, and two cranes, intertwined, by the main pond. ‘The first two came from Polesden Lacey, a nearby Edwardian estate with beautiful gardens, and we sourced the cranes on the internet.’

The garden looks like it takes a lot of work but that, says Diane, isn’t true. ‘In a typical year we mow every couple of weeks. We do a bit of work in it most days but it doesn’t dominate our lives and much of the planting is perennial.

‘In several areas at the back we’ve left the grass longer, creating patches of wildflower meadow full of native plants. We’ve found this works best using plant plugs or spare plants rather than trying to establish from seed – we’ve seen a huge increase in butterflies and other insects.

‘In August 2011 we had a new fence built, moved the paths and created a border with a fan-trained apple tree, blackberries and lots of nectar-rich plants. On the patio and inside the loggia

there are various containers and native bonsai trees, which are quite low maintenance as long as we don’t let them dry out and feed them occasionally.’

Diane and Steve grow vegetables such as runner beans, beetroot, courgette and onions, which share the patch with self-seeding wildflowers. ‘We’ve given up on broad beans because they always get covered in blackfly and we don’t use chemicals,’ explains Diane. ‘I’ve tried every type of natural repellent over the years to deter slugs and snails – from coffee grounds to eggshells, beer traps and copper bands. They all work to varying degrees.’

In 2017, Diane created a photographic book tracking the progress of their garden, which visitors can browse when it is opened to the public during Bookham Open Gardens day, which she helps to organise. Steve’s videos, titled *The Cottage Garden in Surrey*, can be viewed on YouTube.

‘The garden is a critical part of our lives and one of our main hobbies,’ adds Diane. ‘We find it so relaxing. It was particularly wonderful during lockdown, especially in the beginning when no one knew what was going to happen.

‘Just sitting there in the sunshine, watching nature at work gave us a feeling of peace and hope,’ says Diane.

■ **Diane Poole is a member of Bookham Bees WI, Surrey Federation**