

Those of you who were able to attend the MRA Autumn Meeting on 17th October 2022 will remember Peter Smith's inspiring talk on the importance of insect pollinators and the huge problems we all face as a consequence of their decline.

Peter has kindly offered to lend his expertise to us in the hope we can lead the way for insect recovery in Guildford by creating a series of pollinator reserves across Merrow. If you are interested to know more and how you can help, please read on!

An insect apocalypse!

We are seeing an unprecedented drop in the number of insects and of insect species - what has justifiably been called an 'insect apocalypse' - and some of the most affected insects are the pollinators on which we depend for over 75% of everything we eat. Not only that, insects are key prey species for many birds and mammals and with their decline we are also seeing significant drops in the numbers of many of our native birds with some species falling by over 90%. In fact the UK is now one of the most damaged environments in the world and is the bottom 10% of territories in terms of level of bio-diversity intactness.

The main reasons for this decline are the loss of habitat and the impact of pesticides (including insecticides, herbicides and fungicides) - both directly (when insects are killed outright) and indirectly (where food sources for insects such as 'weeds' are removed) but also when insects are exposed to sub-lethal doses of these chemicals which affect their fertility and, in bees for example, their ability to navigate and return to their nests. Increasingly we are also seeing the effects of insects absorbing a cocktail of chemicals from different sources.

Guildford - a pesticide free borough

Guildford Borough Council has committed to becoming a pesticide free borough and is currently conducting trials designed to evaluate alternative methods to pesticide application in the spaces they manage. But we need to do more. Chemicals are still being used in domestic gardens and many people are unaware that some banned chemicals like organophosphates and neonicotinoids are still available in domestic garden products. Surrey Wildlife Trust estimates that there is over 20,000 ha of private garden in Surrey, which equates to over 12% of the land area: what we do in our gardens matters to wildlife!

Pollinator Reserves in Merrow!

By working in association with the Guildford Environmental Forum and Guildford Zero, Merrow could be among the very first urban and suburban areas to help create mini pollinator reserves to provide pockets of insect friendly, pesticide free, areas.

What does this mean in practice?

Insects are small and don't need vast reserves to thrive. What they do need though are safe pockets or corridors that provide sufficient forage and habitat for them throughout the year and a safe, chemical free environment. Our gardens - which in the UK represent an area approaching half a million hectares - provide a potential way of providing a sufficiently large number of safe spaces for our insects.

How can you help?

We invite anyone who has a piece of land - a garden, school grounds or business premises to sign up to our **Merrow Pollinator Reserves** initiative. It doesn't matter how much outdoor space you have; we only ask that you commit to a few simple principles to pollinator friendly gardening, these are:

- Zero use of pesticides - that's inclusive of herbicides and fungicides
- A year-round planting plan which results in plants suitable for both short and long-tongued insect pollinator species
- Avoidance of ornamental cultivars that have no pollen or nectar - we aren't asking you to pull up your favourite ornamental plants but just to be mindful of which plant species benefit insects.
- Tolerance of weeds in some areas of your garden (this might include a 'no mow' approach or a wilderness area and allowing useful species such as ivy to thrive in some areas)
- Make your lawn area more wildlife friendly by adding flower beds, planting a tree or flowering shrub or sowing Spring flowers.

- Avoid being too tidy (at least in some areas of your garden) – this means leave seed heads and some dead stems in place and letting some piles of fallen leaves remain.
- Mulch and cover bare soil areas over winter to encourage soil mycorrhiza and invertebrates and allow the nutrient cycles in your garden to work (e.g. with fallen leaves)
- Talk to your friends and neighbours about the importance of wildlife gardens and persuade them to adopt wildlife and pollinator friendly gardening practices.

Team up with your neighbours!

You don't have to do this alone. You could team up with your adjoining neighbours to create bigger mini-reserves - insects don't mind fences - and each garden or space will be a slightly different habitat.

Help and support

We will give you lots of support around each of these in the form of information packs and online resources.

What we need you to do now is to get in touch to let us know if you would like to join in. Are you able to make a pledge to do the above? Do you have neighbours who would be interested in joining you? If you can commit to **all** the above principles then we can make your area (you can create your own name for it if you wish) a **designated Pollinator Reserve** and it will be featured on the Guildford Environmental Forum map of key sites at the Guildford Zero Carbon Centre on Friary Street. If you don't feel quite ready to make the plunge with every principle - for example some residents may wish to continue to use particular chemical treatments (though we'd rather you didn't as garden chemicals are a big part of the problem) - then we can provide help and advice on how to make your gardens more pollinator friendly.

You may be interested in going that little bit further. For instance, digging a wildlife pond is hugely beneficial for insects and other wildlife, as is having a compost heap etc. and we would be happy to discuss your ideas, but to begin with, for our Merrow Pollinator Reserves project we just ask that you can sign up to the above principles.

Look out for useful local workshops in areas such as soil health, composting or even scything at Zero Carbon Guildford <https://www.zerocarbonguildford.org/> and Rosamund Community Garden <http://www.guildfordcommunitygarden.org.uk/>

If you would like to express your interest or discuss your ideas further, send an email to Stephen Rudd, the MRA Environment Officer environment@merrowresidents.org. Please include as much information as possible including your address and postcode, the size of your garden, if you would like information on any topic or theme and whether you would just like to discuss your plans or ideas further. He will then work with Peter Smith and other experts at GEF and Zero Carbon Guildford to help ensure you and your neighbours are as supported as possible.

It would be wonderful to have a few mini reserves setup in Merrow by the spring when the insects become active again, so please do give this some thought.

Thank you for taking the opportunity to read this and thank you in advance for your support.

Stephen Rudd
Environment Officer, Merrow Residents Association