

HOW TO BUILD A GARDEN ARK



Every generation has less and less awareness of what truly healthy living landscapes actually look like. People don't realise, for example, that the bare grassy hillsides are not supposed to be bare, that they are over grazed and support almost no life other than sheep. They don't know what a diverse native woodland looks like, or that a variety of life depends on them. They are accustomed to seeing stands of monoculture non-native, much poisoned, conifer plantations, which are dark and dead underneath for the most part.

They don't remember what it was like to have shoals of fish in the rivers, to have crystal clear seas cleaned by the massive beds of oysters, to have oodles of birds, insects, frogs, butterflies, hedgehogs, etc. sharing our land. It is so quiet now. Eerily quiet. When you're driving at night your windscreen is no longer covered in dead insects and moths like it used to be when you were a small child.

As a species, we immediately forget what is lost and only see what exists right here, right now as the new normal. Every generation is experiencing huge shifts in what passes for a natural system. These changes have become more extreme over the last few generations. What we see as dead landscapes, our kids will see as natural and normal.

There is a phrase for this and most of us these days suffer from it. It's called '*Shifting*

Baseline Syndrome'

“Generational amnesia is when knowledge is not passed down from generation to generation. For example, people may think of as ‘pristine’ wilderness, the wild places that they experienced during their childhood, but with every generation this baseline becomes more and more degraded” Dr. E.J. Milner-Gulland

Step 1. Make it clear that this land has a purpose!

IMPORTANT! Download our community Ark logo. Print it out and put a waterproofed version onto a prominent signpost in your land or print it onto a flag. Write (or print and paste) ‘This is an Ark’ clearly beside the logo. If you only manage the words, that works fine too.

Add the Website address clearly for passers-by or for interested neighbours to help them understand that there is a good reason for what people often see as a ‘messy garden’.

(www.weartheark.org)

Be creative with your sign! I am looking forward to seeing the more creative productions!

Spread the word and share your signs online if you would like to, using the #thisisanark and #letsbuildanark so we can find them. We will repost as many as we are able on our social media sites.

Now you can be proud and everyone who sees it can research The Ark project on the website.

You and your land are connected under the umbrella of our caring community.

Half earth. I am a big supporter of the ‘**Half earth’ theory**, which proposes to give half the earth back to nature, to wilderness. Always try and leave at least half of your garden to re-

wild. Just leave it be, let it heal. Every tiny patch of earth matters. If you can't manage to re-wild half of your land, then any that you can spare, even just the boundaries, is all welcome and important.

Step 2. Reboot!

If your patch of earth is not damaged land, then it is already primed with all the native seeds the site needs to heal itself and reboot an ecosystem that will support all the creatures you share the land with.

If it is damaged land which needs help, it may not be obvious at first but you will see the clues for this after some time has passed. You might notice the lack of growth after a few seasons or even a year. In urban areas the earth might be poisoned from heavy metals or some other source of pollution. It may be badly compacted or mostly dead from multiple chemical applications.

After a year, if it's still looking pretty bare, then it may be time to make a call to reboot the ecosystem. Source local open-pollinated, organic, native seeds and sow a wildflower patch there or a wild herb and clover mix. This will begin the clean-up of the soil and spark new energy.

If it is a thick monoculture sward of lawn, you may need to remove the grass and re-seed it with a native seed mix, as stated above. Plants can find it hard to establish themselves in competition with lawns.

However, if it is an old lawn, it may already be full of diversity and you may only need to let it grow long without disturbing it. You will see lots of wild leafy plants in the lawn which will tell you if it is diverse. There will be almost none in a thick monoculture of grass and this may need support as detailed previously, to encourage diversity.

You could experiment if you are not sure, and leave the lawn alone to see if it creates a community of wild plants. If after a year, there is still only a crop of grass, then there are various ways to help it along.

DO NOT spray the grass to remove it. There is no place for chemicals here. SO much other life visible and invisible gets hurt from chemicals. If it is a small area, cover the lawn with flattened cardboard boxes, stripped of all tape and soak them. Cover this with a thin layer of peat free compost or topsoil and sow a native flower seed mix directly into that. Keep an eye out for hungry birds!

Large areas of lawn can be more difficult. Here are some ways to work with it.

- You can sheet mulch it for a season to kill off the grass. Old wool carpets, large sheets of black plastic are some possibilities, preferably second hand and recyclable. We don't need to add to the plastic problem.
- If you were able, you could lightly till or scratch up the surface of the lawn area and expose the soil beneath, this would allow the seed bank in the soil have a chance to germinate. Once the seeds are exposed to light for even the smallest moment, it is enough of a catalyst to spark the seed into action to grow up and become a plant.

If the land needs more help, then you could gradually import native plants and trees but remember, nature's intelligence is way beyond our understanding, so don't try too hard. Trust in nature. She already has everything she needs and has this self-healing process perfected. If you are buying plants, then source a local stock of native trees and shrubs as this provides the most beneficial support for the local insects. Native plants are far more beneficial to insects and birds than non-natives. Over the millennia, layers of relationships have formed between native creatures and native plants. We just don't connect the dots often enough or understand

the intricacies of those relationships.

If you can collect seeds from a local native woodland “nursery” within a 10 mile radius from your land, this is the best practice. Otherwise have a look at the local hedgerows as these can be hundreds of years old and bare-root cuttings, taken from these in winter, may be the better bet.

If you need to buy plants, although it may be challenging, try not to buy plants from sources that cannot prove they are not treated with chemicals. These chemicals (fungicides, pesticides and herbicides) are undoing all the good work you are hoping to do, and the pollinators are getting ill collecting pollen from systemic, persistent chemicals in the life cycle of the plants. Organic, locally sourced and native is best.

Step 3. Break down those barriers!

Wildlife cannot move easily through fences or walled in gardens. Often it stops them being able to access many sources of food and sanctuary. If you have neighbouring boundary walls or fences, perhaps you could discuss this with your neighbours and if they agree, then get a contractor to drill a hole or two in the base of each boundary, (checking that you don't destabilise them structurally) to allow the free movement of creatures between gardens.

If your neighbours are on-board, gradually replace solid boundaries with wildlife corridors of native hedgerows which will also provide a strong nesting habitat.

Step 4. Embrace the ‘messiness’.

We are losing the magic in the world, in ourselves. We are trained to see wildness in our

gardens as ‘messy and lazy’, to see neatness as ‘care’. Neatness in nature means death. There is very little life in a neat garden. There is no magic in a tidy, wall to wall carpet of lawn. There is no hope in those spaces, no sanctuary. Re-wilding land allows life to thrive once more.

Death is an important part of life.

Standing deadwood supports a huge amount of life. A living mature oak, for example, supports over 500 species of life, but a dead or dying tree supports thousands! Leave the dead leaves, branches and old growth. There is a huge range of support for the living, from the dead and dying elements in nature. At least 40% of woodland creatures depend on dead wood at some point in their lives. Intricate relationships exist between many native plants, fungi, insects and other creatures.

Step 5. Embrace the Wild native plants

Nature scabs over any cuts in her skin with her first aid plaster which is known as the ‘weed seed bank’. Leave them do their important work as they emerge. They provide vital food for insects and pollinators, they shove their feet deep into the soil and draw up minerals from deep down up into their leaves. Once they die back then they re-mineralise the soil as they rot into the earth. Such an important job they have! They are healing the soil. We should encourage and admire them.

Embrace these native plants. They are the front line of nature’s army. Instead we have been trained to nuke them at any sign of emergence, see them as messy, unwanted and useless.

We need to rebrand these important plants as the native wild plant seed bank. The term ‘Weeds’ is far too derogatory and negative, especially considering the vital part these plants

play in rebooting an ecosystem.

They are Nature's foundation stones.

For example, many of our native butterflies depend on nettles as a food source for their larvae. The red admiral, the small tortoiseshell, the peacock and the comma. If you have a patch of nettles behind the shed or in a tucked away spot – try to just leave them. You will be doing so much to support these – and many other – insects.

***STOP & THINK!** Ask ourselves – why are we spraying and trying to kill all the early flowers that are a vital source of food for pollinators? Are they really so bad or disruptive to our lives that they have to be nuked at first sign? Can we change our thought processes and let them do their job before we mow them down and never use counterintuitive chemicals?*

Step 6. Let the scrubby messy thorny thickets be!

Leave those brambles and other thorny natives emerge and thrive. They protect young trees and create wonderful sanctuary for many wild mammals. They are vital for the re-establishment of a native ecosystem. They provide shelter from the wind, protection from grazers such as deer to allow saplings to establish, they are powerful deep rooters that remineralise and restructure the soil and they are also great habitats and food sources for wildlife. The signage will be the key to educating people how beneficial these spaces are to families of all shapes and sizes.

Step 7. Ditch the chemicals.

Stop spraying, leave the land breathe and recover. The bacteria in the soil are killed off by

landscaping chemicals and those bacteria are a vital part of the restoration of health to the land. They are the basis of health in the soils ecosystem. These commonly used poisons also leach into the waterways and cause havoc and death in our water ecosystems. Chemicals have no place in an Ark.

Slug pellets may kill slugs and snails, but they also kill other creatures that unwittingly feed on their dead bodies such as hedgehogs and birds. Rat and mice poison is causing the decimation of our owl populations with only 400 breeding pairs of Barn owls now left in Ireland alone.

We need to join the dots. Trying to solve problems with a chemical solution, always leads to other unseen problems.

Everything is connected.

While this might be a challenge, try not to ever buy plants from sources that cannot prove they are not treated with chemicals. These chemicals (fungicides, pesticides and herbicides) are undoing all the good work you are hoping to do, and the pollinators are getting ill collecting pollen from the systemic, persistent chemicals in the life cycle of the plants.

Organic, locally sourced and native is best, or plant cuttings from your friends which are easy and free to do. Sourcing cuttings from local old growth hedgerows is a very positive move for local wildlife.

Step 8. Be part of the process. (See the LEARN MORE section for more activities for your Arks).

If you want to design areas within your garden, a mown or bark mulch path through the ark leading to a simple circle of lawn, bark mulch, paving or pebble to sit and immerse yourself

is a great template. The time for using gardens as simply feasts for our senses and a place to display our current or fashionable artistic sensibilities is gone. I feel we need to step up now and give the land back to nature. By keeping some of the land to grow food and letting the rest become a sanctuary, you are doing more good than you can imagine.

Step 9. Spotlight on life.

Make a list. If possible, begin to list what creatures have made their homes here. Who have you noticed, what insects, lichens, plants, mushrooms, birds and mammals have claimed sanctuary here? Share the list on social media platforms. Post a photo of you and your ark online if you would like to! Tag it with #letsbuildanark and #wearetheark

All of this will raise the awareness of passers-by. Most often these creatures go un-noticed and un-cared for. Why not even create a noticeboard with animal and plant photos for parents and their children to pause and learn from?

Let's put a spotlight on the hidden life we share this world with.

Step 10. Be aware of possible re-wilding concerns.

- **Keep an eye out for 'invasive' species.** We are not at war with these plants. If they are not integrating and not allowing the emergence of a native ecosystem, then work gently to restrict or remove them to allow a healthy community to develop. You can research in your part of the world, what those invasive species are. They are different all over the planet now. This is a controversial and difficult problem. Different organisations have different ways of dealing with it. Please research this yourself and make your own call. Chemical controls are not an option for me. I feel that the effect of their use far outweighs the benefits of removing invasive plants.

- **Wildfires.** In hotter parts of the world you may need to consider fire breaks in the emerging

plant system in-case of wildfires breaking out. In some parts of the world this is already an issue and may well become a problem in more temperate areas all too soon.

Step 11. Sit back and enjoy.

Let the land explode into life under your guidance and care. Learn to love every bump and bristle. Watch in awe as it fills up with butterflies, insects, hedgehogs, wildflowers and magic. Surround yourself with life and meaning. Be patient. Every year will see more and more life restored to the land. Nature heals so quickly and word gets around so fast that there is a sanctuary available. Be ready... so many creatures and their families will turn up almost overnight!

You have made an Ark.

You are contributing to the solutions in a real and positive way.

Hope is the harvest.