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ORGANIC ALLOTMENT
BLOG**

Things to do in November

It is the month to look after your birds, bats and brassicas



Teasels produce fine seed favoured by finches

It's time to turn your thoughts to wildlife. Leave seed heads and berries on plants for winter eating. Teasels, dandelions and thistles are weeds but they produce the fine seed that draws in finches – always a pleasure to see, particularly the gold ones.

The secret is to see the plot as a wildlife larder. Look out for plants that offer winter food and protection. If you haven't got any, consider planting a few. Don't worry too much as to whether they are native or not. It is more important to offer a wide variety of shapes and sizes and keep up the succession throughout the year, particularly in winter when food is scarce. If you happen to have a rough old firethorn (*Pyracantha*) around the site leave it. It is invaluable for its winter berries as well as the sharp thorns ideal for protecting hibernating creatures from predators. A *Viburnum tinus* is a rare source of nectar through winter and it will produce berries in earliest spring. Roses provide nectar and splendid hips – none bigger and juicier than those of the native dog rose, *Rosa canina* and the sweet briar or the eglantine rose, *Rosa rubiginosa*.



Even insects like a night or two in a hotel

Supply water even if it's only a washing up bowl sunken into the ground. Better still, persuade the committee to put in a big wildlife pond. Ponds tick every biodiversity box and are an endless source of fascination, particularly for children. Key points are to place them in a light spot and to make sure that there is a gently sloping shoreline for creatures to get in and out safely. For good pond advice look up Froglife. Ban fish as they eat everyone and everything else. Don't let the pond freeze over in winter. If it does, make a hole with hot water. Shattering the ice with an axe sends out awful shock waves to its poor inhabitants, many of which will be hibernating in its depths.

The saying goes that there is more life in a dead tree than a living one. Make a log pile in a damp corner so that a colony of dead wood creatures will build up. It is an important habitat for rare beetles. You need to leave the log pile undisturbed for many years as the diet of rotting wood is so low in nutrition that it takes a stag beetle larvae three and five years to pupate. After that it has from June to August to breed before its life is over.



Hips, too, are favoured by birds

If you have a generous compost heap or bin you will be providing a habitat of warm decaying plant material – conditions not easily found elsewhere. You may prefer not to know about the heaving life and death struggle that goes on within it, most of which is between creatures too small to see. You may also draw in grass snakes and slow worms as they enjoy the warmth. If you want to attract them leave a sheet of corrugated iron nearby to absorb the rays of the sun.

If you are feeling enterprising, knock up some insect hotels, bird and bat boxes. I recently attended a workshop where even the least competent of us, including young children, made a respectable habitat box within the hour.



Isabella's bird box

If you already have [bird boxes](#), this is the time to clean them. Legally, eggs may only be removed between now and January. Give the boxes a good scrubbing with scorching water, dry them well and put in some clean wood shavings. Place bird boxes well out of the way of cats and avoid a due north or due south situation. The birds will inspect them through winter with a view to nesting and may roost in them before that. Bats need a clear flight path and the boxes should be placed high up.

Conversely, remember that your needs count too. Protect young brassicas from the birds, particularly pigeons, with netting. They will decimate them as the cold increases and food gets scarcer. Hold the netting away from the crops with a structure so they can't peck through it. Put out bird food. Should you need help identifying your feathered visitors, the RSPB has a great [identification site](#).

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