

Make your outdoor space work for you and nature



Nature
on Your
Doorstep

2 Build the
basics

Next steps in your mini-makeover



Don't worry if you're not 'a gardener'. You don't need to be. We also understand that many people don't have a lot of time, money or energy.

Our resident expert Adrian Thomas will show you how to improve your space, and make it a brilliant home for wildlife at the same time.



In this guide we look at how to create the structure of the outdoor space. This is the functional framework of paths and structures that will allow you to move around the space in all weathers, and get out and enjoy it. Costs shown are a guide.

In **Leaflet 1** we looked at how a bit of pre-planning is time well spent. Hopefully, you now have a clear idea – and some simple sketches and checklist – of what you're going to do. It's time to crack on making your dream space.

Adrian's handy hint: "Don't try to do it all in one go. Gardens are never finished, so enjoy the journey, at the pace that suits you".



Create the garden framework



Adrian's handy hint: 'Remember, hard surfaces are dead space for wildlife and the planet, so keep them to a minimum where you can.'

The main paths give you a solid framework. The rest of your garden can develop around that. It's also good to add seating areas and garden structures early on.

Be prepared to bring in the professionals if needed. Typical day rates for garden contractors are £120–180 per person, and most jobs require two people.

Paths

The main choices for garden paths are:

- **Paving slabs**
Either concrete, porcelain or natural stone, usually laid on concrete on a bed of compacted hardcore (crushed rocks and concrete). All these materials have a big carbon footprint and prevent rainwater from draining freely. Slabs: £20–50/square metre. Hardcore: £30–50 bulk bag will cover about 5 square metres.
- **Bricks or stone setts**
Similar to paving slabs, but smaller pieces. Often laid on a bed of damp sand, so better for the environment than concrete, and free-draining. Setts: £20–50/square metre.
- **Gravel/shingle**
A 25mm layer of medium-sized (10–15mm) gravel typically laid over a weed-suppressing membrane (many of which are plastic-based) on a bed of consolidated hardcore. Vertical edging boards stop the gravel spreading into lawns and borders. It's better for the environment but not suitable for wheelchairs. Gravel: £60–100 bulk bag (c.850kg) covers about 15 square metres of path.
- **Grass**
The kindest path for the planet, and cheapest for you, but can become muddy if well used. See 'Laying a lawn' (page 6) for how to install it. Turf: £2.50–4.00/square metre.

Patios

They are typically made with wooden decking or with much the same materials and methods as paved paths, but over a deeper layer of hardcore. Make sure any decking is from sustainable sources, such as that with the FSC logo.

Why not create seating areas of gravel rather than solid slabs? This will help your budget, reduce your carbon footprint, allow rainfall to soak into the soil, and can be planted with low-growing herbs such as thymes to help wildlife.



Sheds and summerhouses

Sheds provide safe, dry storage for garden tools, furniture, toys and more, and most are relatively easy to install if you have basic DIY skills and some helping hands. Larger sheds and summerhouses may need professional construction.

A small wooden shed (2 x 1.33m, 6' x 4') will cost £250–400, with prices rising to several thousand for summerhouses. All should be installed on a firm, level base. Again, only choose timber products from a sustainable source.

If you'd like to add a green roof (which will make it better for wildlife), the uprights and roof need to be robust enough to carry the considerable weight.



Greenhouses

The warm, sheltered conditions allow you to grow plants such as tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers, plus tender seedlings. Your budget will determine what size you get, starting with cheap plastic 'growhouses' for about £25 up to grand greenhouses with toughened glass for several thousand.

Large greenhouses are best installed by professionals, unless you're confident handling glass panels. Most will need a well prepared, level base, but this can be well compacted soil rather than paving.

Greenhouses do best in a sunny position. Good ventilation such as roof vents and louvres will help stop it overheating.



Electricity in the garden

If you need power in the garden, now is the time to add it. It should be laid by an electrician, and buried 600mm underground, using armoured cables. Check if any other services already pass under the garden.

Preparing the soil

Once you have the framework of the garden in place, you can turn your attention to all the space in between – areas for all the green stuff! Your starting point is the soil.

To work out what type of soil you have, squeeze a handful of damp (but not soggy) soil.

- If it doesn't hold together and feels gritty, the soil is probably sandy. It will warm up quickly in spring and will drain quickly, but it won't hold nutrients well.
- If it doesn't hold together well, and has stones and flints, you are probably on a chalky soil.
- If you can roll it into a ball, but it doesn't hold its shape well, it is likely to be loam soil, which is the easiest soil to grow things in.
- If it holds its shape enough to roll it into a sausage and feels rather slimy and sticky, you have clay soil, which is very rich but wet and heavy in winter and can bake hard in summer.

Whatever your soil type, if it is compacted, dig it over with a garden fork to bring air into it and allow you to plant into it.

Sandy, chalky and clay soils can be improved by adding organic matter – bulk bags of topsoil, compost or well-rotted manure. You can fork it into the soil, or just lay it on top.



Adrian's handy hint: 'If your garden is covered with weeds, smother them with sheets of old cardboard. It will take a few weeks but avoids using weedkillers..'



Laying a real lawn

Lawns are wonderful – they're great for playing on, relaxing on the eye, and relatively easy to make and maintain. They're also habitat for all sorts of wildlife.

For an instant lawn, lay turf for about £2.50–4.00 per square metre. No previous experience is required but be aware the rolls can be heavy. It is best done March–May or September–October.

- **Prepare the ground well:** dig the soil using a fork, breaking up any big lumps and removing large stones and weeds. Grass doesn't like to get waterlogged, so if you have clay soil, dig in grit or sharp sand to improve drainage. Rake the soil level. Then shuffle all over it to compress it, and rake again to ensure it really is level and the surface is fine crumbs.
- **Measure the area of turf you need.**
- **Lay it the day it arrives.** If you leave it rolled up, it will quickly turn yellow. Stand on wooden planks as you lay it to spread your weight and help the turf bed down evenly. Each turf may shrink a little after laying, so butt them up against each other with a slight overlap and squidge the edges together.
- **Water it to get it established.** After that, even if it dries out in hot weather, it will turn green again with the first rains.

Lawn 'weeds' such as daisies and dandelions are likely to appear. Embrace them, '...they're great for wildlife and look pretty too. You can even buy turf with wildflowers already in it!

For a cheaper option, sow grass seed in spring or autumn. Prepare your soil in the same way. It will take several weeks until it is suitable to walk on.

Adrian's handy hint: 'Avoid plastic grass. It's an environmental nightmare, with no value for wildlife, and is not the easy maintenance option you might think.'



Instant impact

In the third guide [hyperlink] in this series, we'll look at how to fill your space with trees, shrubs, flowers and vegetables, plus all the added features that will make your garden come alive from ponds to birdboxes.

Right now, with the basics all in place, you probably want something quick and easy to brighten your space. Here are some suggestions:

- Buy some attractive large pots, fill them with peat-free compost, and add a few choice plants for colour, scent, nectar and pollen. Try herbs such as lavender, oregano, chives and mint, which you can then use in the kitchen, too.
- If you have an area of bare soil but little yet to go in it, buy a pack of cornfield annual seeds - **see our page on cornfield annuals**. These can be sown August–October or March–May to give a blast of colour in spring and summer.
- Add a birdfeeder and birdbath - **see here**. A new garden offers little natural food for birds, so this is a way to provide supplementary food and somewhere for birds to drink and spruce themselves up!



Next steps

Nature is in crisis, and the solution starts at home! For loads of ideas on how you can help wildlife where you live, go to:
rspb.org.uk/natureonyourdoorstep

For more information about wildlife gardening:
rspb.org.uk/natureonyourdoorstep

For advice on creating wildlife-friendly balconies:
rspb.org.uk/wildlife-friendly-balconies

Mini-guide series: making your outdoor space work for you and nature

1. Getting started
2. Build the basics
3. Bring it to life - coming soon

Share your wildlife stories

We'd love to hear how you get on. Share your photos and stories on social media using **#NatureGardenChallenge**.

For more information about the RSPB and how to join, visit rspb.org.uk



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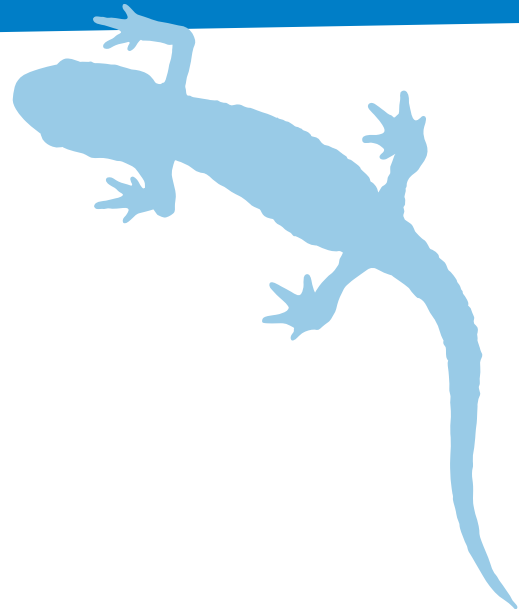
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