



The countryside charity
Hertfordshire

Countryside Close to Home

Roses, blackbirds, flowery lawns, the weather (again) and more:
plus - why gardeners should stop using peat

In June and July gardens fill with flowers, and these are the traditional months for roses. We mainly grow climbers and ramblers out of reach of the fallow deer which used to frequent the garden, although we see these deer less often than we once did. Nowadays roses come in a huge variety of flower types and sizes and many are repeat flowering, extending their season into the autumn.

The most common of the 14 or so rose species native to Britain grows in our garden. Sweetly scented dog rose (*Rosa canina*) grows in the front hedge bordering the village road, its flowers high up in the light.



The native species all have five petals; in the case of dog rose they are usually pale pink. Dog roses are abundant in hedges in June and early July, seen here (right) near Widford alongside a stretch of the Hertfordshire Way.



Dog rose

Other common British rose species, also scented, include field rose (*R. arvensis*) which is usually white, eglantine or sweet briar (*R. rubiginosa*) which has dark pink edges to the petals, and burnet rose (*R. pimpinellifolia*), which has spines and bristles, creamy-white flowers and purple hips. I have planted the Dunwich rose in the garden, a naturally-occurring form of *R. pimpinellifolia*, discovered growing on cliffs near Dunwich in Suffolk, which has pale yellow flowers in May.

The rose is England's national flower. The red and white Tudor rose was the symbol adopted by the Lancastrian heir Henry Tudor, who became Henry VII after he defeated the Yorkist Richard III at the battle of Bosworth in 1485 and subsequently married Elizabeth of York. The Tudor rose combined the symbols of the Yorkists and the Lancastrians, rival branches of the Plantagenet family which had fought the Wars of the Roses for the preceding 30 years.

The white rose of York was *Rosa x alba* 'semi-plena', almost certainly a cross or hybrid (indicated by the 'x' in the name) between the dog rose and the damask rose, which originated in the eastern Mediterranean. 'Semi-plena' means semi-double. The Lancastrian red rose was *Rosa gallica*, probably originating in Persia but cultivated in France in the medieval period.

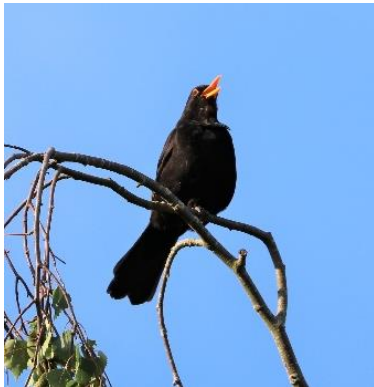


Dog roses may scramble to three metres or more above the ground in a hedgerow. Another rose you might encounter while out and about in the Hertfordshire countryside is field rose, which only grows to about a metre in height.

This rose was seen near Barkway during my walk of the Hertfordshire Way long-distance footpath in 2012.

Field rose

Blackbirds



Male blackbirds sing their loud and melodious song from a high branch or roof top for several months each year. It is usually the first song heard in the dawn chorus (which I'm sometimes awake enough to hear), and continues intermittently all day, with another long spell in the evening. They sing to defend their territories and often a rival or two may be audible nearby. By late July blackbirds will fall silent and won't resume singing again until early in the spring.

Male blackbird

Blackbirds belong to the thrush family and the females, which are brown with spots and streaks on their breasts, more closely resemble the colouring of their cousins, which include song and mistle thrushes. Young blackbirds are very speckled.

Blackbirds are very common in the UK and frequently seen in gardens. They hunt for worms and other soil invertebrates (insects and similar) on lawns and among the leaf litter in borders. They also eat berries. They are resident all year throughout most of the British Isles, and defend their territories fiercely for much of the year.



Male blackbird

Blackbird nests are built by the females low down in vegetation, sometimes on the ground, lined with mud, and here the pair may raise two or three broods in a season. Blackbird numbers in the countryside have been affected by hedgerow loss, but in gardens their numbers have been stable. Gardeners can help blackbirds by avoiding chemicals which may kill their food supply, and by planting shrubs which support caterpillars and produce berries.

Flowery lawns and 'no-mow May'



In recent years the charity Plantlife has run a campaign called 'no-mow May', asking garden owners to cut their lawns less often and to record the species which appear in a square metre of the lawn. Unsurprisingly lawns cut only every four weeks appear to support 10 times as many bees as lawns cut more often.

Selfheal

In 2020 the very dry weather in May meant that the grass in my lawn grew very little, and it was left uncut for six or seven weeks. A number of wild flower species produced flower heads, including both red and white clover, knapweed, ox-eye daisy, buttercup, yarrow, sorrel, plantain and selfheal. I enjoyed not cutting the lawn so often, but had to be careful to avoid treading on bees. I'm intending to keep the grass longer in parts of the garden on a regular basis.

Large clumps of bird's-foot trefoil in unmown grassy areas of the garden are popular with bees. This plant is also the food plant for clouded yellow, common blue and several other butterfly species. The flowers are low-growing, often tinted with red, and appear from June to October. The seed heads are pods, which grouped together look like bird claws. Another name for this plant is eggs and bacon. It's a member of the pea family.



Bumble bee on bird's-foot trefoil



Little heath butterflies frequent my flowery lawn for much of the summer. These are small butterflies which have a wingspan of around 1½ inches (38 mm). The upper sides of the wings are orange but you will only glimpse them as the butterfly is flying. At rest the small heath always keeps its wings closed. This species is found in all types of grassy areas throughout Britain. Its larval food plants are a variety of grasses.

Small heath butterfly



Goldfinches have learnt how to feed on the seed heads of common cat's ear (*Hypochoeris radicata*) growing in the lawn. These birds are too small to reach the seed heads from the ground, but perch on the stems to bend them over, bringing them within reach.

Goldfinch on common cat's ear

June and July weather



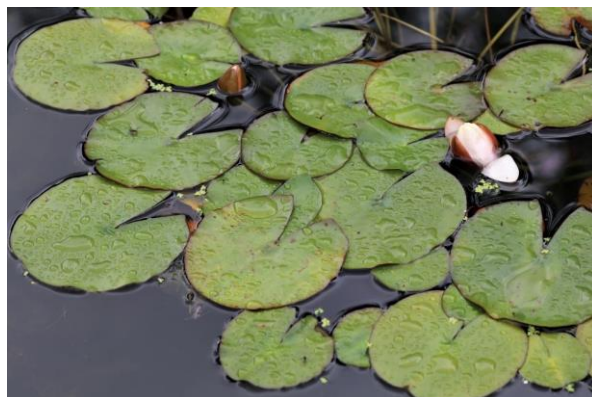
We expect summer weather to be warm, dry and sunny, but heavy rain in June is surprisingly common, and has been called 'the June monsoon'. Downpours have frequently turned the Glastonbury festival site into a mud bath, and when Wimbledon was held in June play was frequently interrupted by rain. It has long been noted that as June arrives the weather seems to get worse, often following the driest three months of the year.

Raindrops on foxgloves

The weather across the British Isles is hugely influenced by the position of the jet stream, a high-level belt of strong winds which blow from west to east around the globe. Its position and velocity often shifts, which causes changes in our weather. In the northern hemisphere there is colder air on the northern side of the jet stream, and warmer air to the south.

With the jet stream to the north of Britain we typically experience warm settled weather; when it is overhead it often brings low pressure systems and their associated fronts, which head across the Atlantic to Britain bringing wind and rain. This occurrence in June is sometimes called 'the return of the westerlies', and the associated movement of the jetstream may be a result of lengthening hours of daylight and stronger sunshine as summer arrives.

If we have had a dry spring, as we did in 2019 and again in 2020, rain in June is often welcomed by farmers and gardeners. However, summer rainfall rarely gets down deep enough to recharge the aquifer which feeds our chalk streams and supplies much of Hertfordshire's water supply. Instead it evaporates from the ground or is taken up by trees and plants which return it to the atmosphere as water vapour, a process called transpiration. This is why gardeners in our part of England are urged to use water carefully and save as much rain as possible in water butts and tanks.



Rain drops on lily leaves

According to legend the weather on St Swithin's day, July 15th, is meant to be a predictor for the weather for the rest of the summer: if it rains, it will rain for 40 days and if it is fine it will stay fine for 40 days. St Swithin (perhaps more correctly spelt Swithun) was a 9th century bishop of Winchester, then the capital of Wessex. He directed that he should be buried in the churchyard 'where the sweet rain of heaven may fall upon my grave'. He died in the year 862 and over a century later his tomb was moved into the cathedral - on 15th July 971. Shortly afterwards a huge storm was followed by 40 days of terrible rain. In Europe there are other saints thought to have a similar influence on the weather. It does seem to be the case that summer weather patterns become established in mid-July and then persist until the end of August

Around my garden pond



Broad-bodied chasers and damselflies are usually the first dragonflies to emerge around the pond in late spring: the timing will depend on the weather. During June they should be joined by emperor dragonflies. I managed to photograph this male during one of the rare occasions when it was resting on a plant stem. This is Britain's bulkiest dragonfly, mainly found on ponds, lakes, canals and slow-moving rivers.

Male Emperor dragonfly

Emperors are usually around 3 inches (78 mm) long. This male spent hours each day patrolling the pond and driving away other dragonflies. On one occasion I watched it catching a small butterfly while on the wing. The species belongs to the hawker group of dragonflies and is widespread in southern England and Wales.

Female emperor dragonflies are mainly green. This one (right) is laying its eggs (ovipositing).





Male blue damselflies (sometimes with their green females) are on the wing from May to July, appearing when there is some sunshine. They may emerge in April and persist until September if the weather is suitable. From the U-shaped marking on the second segment of its abdomen, just below the wing bases, I've tentatively identified this one as an azure damselfly. This species is common on small ponds and streams and at the edges of larger areas of water. They typically measure around 1¼ inches (33 mm) in length.

Azure damselfly

I have seen another species of chaser around my pond. This is a four-spotted chaser, normally on the wing from May to August and perhaps longer. It was rather harassed by the emperor dragonfly and it rested only briefly, with no sun shining directly onto its body to pick out the golden colouring of its abdomen. The species is common in the British Isles and found around shallow ponds and lakes with plenty of fringing vegetation. It has two prominent dark spots on each wing. The males and females look the same.

Four-spotted chaser



Birds overhead

Swallows, swifts and house martins all appear over the garden, and the swallows frequently dip down to drink and catch small flying insects over the pond. Unfortunately all my attempts to capture a respectable photograph of any of these birds as they speed over the garden have failed.

One day I saw a kestrel heading our way and succeeded with a few photos just as it passed right overhead, looking down at me.



Kestrel

Kestrels are a species of falcon, a group of agile and fast-flying birds of prey which also includes peregrines and hobbies. Kestrels are often seen hovering over a road verge, looking for prey such as small mammals, especially voles. They also eat small birds, worms and insects. From below they appear white, speckled with brown and black and with dark tips to their tail feathers. The upper sides of the inner wings and body are chestnut brown, while the outer wings are darker - just visible in this photo. The tail fans out while hovering but is held in a tight straight shape when the bird plunges to catch some prey.

Kestrels don't build their own nests but instead take over old nests built by other birds, or just occupy a ledge on a building or cliff. They also nest in holes and special kestrel boxes. They lay clutches of 3-6 eggs in spring, which take nearly a month to incubate and about four weeks to fledge once hatched. In years when vole numbers are low kestrels may rear fewer or no young.

Some more flowers

A single foxglove produces masses of tiny seed, so the one plant of the native species *Digitalis purpurea* I originally planted here could have filled the whole garden if I hadn't weeded out many seedlings. Foxgloves start to flower in June and may continue into August. I've also introduced the white form. Foxgloves are common in light shade on the edges of woods but do well in full sunlight too.



The tubular shape of foxglove flowers forces bees right inside in search of nectar and the anthers brush pollen onto the hairy bee bodies. The stigma (the female part of the flower which receives the pollen) matures only after the pollen from that flower has shed, thus ensuring that the pollen involved in fertilization comes via bee bodies from another flower. In this

backlit photo on the right some of the internal flower parts are visible.



Foxglove flowers with bumble bees

Foxgloves are usually biennial, flowering in the second year after germination, although sometimes the plants will flower in subsequent years. They are highly toxic and must never be eaten, although the plant has been used to produce medicines. Once used to treat dropsy (when fluid accumulates in tissues) it was sometimes fatal. Eventually it was discovered that the dose had to be exact: too much caused heart failure. Today extracts from foxgloves are still used by doctors to treat heart conditions.



Some years ago I discovered an orchid plant which appeared in a flower bed dug from an area of former lawn. It's a common spotted orchid, the country's most frequent orchid species, which is found in both shady places and open ground and flowers from June to August. It has spotted leaves, like the similar species heath spotted orchid. To tell them apart you need to look at the shape of the individual flowers, then consult a flower book (flora). The original plant in my garden has expanded into a clump of several stems and a second plant has also appeared.

Other orchids also have spotted leaves, like the early purple orchid, with quite different flowers, which appear from April to June.

Common spotted orchid

The orchid family is large, with many species worldwide. In Britain some orchid species are widespread but many are very rare; their whereabouts sometimes has to be kept secret to protect them from plant collectors.

Orchids are monocotyledons, one of the two great subdivisions of the flowering plants. Typically 'monocots' have leaves with parallel veins which are often long and narrow. Other monocots are grasses, many bulbous species, rushes and sedges. They have only one first-leaf or cotyledon - the first leaf which appears when a seed germinates. The other subdivision comprises the dicotyledons, a more diverse group containing many familiar flowering plants, with two cotyledons on their seedlings. 'Dicots' have net-veined leaves in a huge variety of shapes.

Orchids produce masses of tiny seeds which blow in the wind over long distances. This means that orchids often appear unexpectedly, sometimes on abandoned industrial land and 'new' landscapes like motorway verges. Some orchid species don't flower every year and may reappear after a long absence. Either scenario could apply to my orchids.

This delicately-flowered water plantain has self-seeded around my pond. There are several sizable clumps and it is spreading around the pond edges. I didn't plant this, so assume that it arrived on the feet of a visiting bird, perhaps one of the herons which often visit the pond.

This is another monocotyledon, with narrowish leaves with parallel veins and whorls of tiny pink flowers. The plant is common in the south of Britain although rare in the north, found in ponds, ditches and streams. It flowers from June to August.

Water plantain



Butterflies



This butterfly is a meadow brown, possibly the country's commonest butterfly. The first ones usually appear in the garden in late June, or later if the weather is cold and wet, and on warm sunny days there may be many flying and resting on flowers. They often perch with their wings closed, but it's easier to tell the males and females apart when their wings are open. This is a female; the males have much darker brown on their upperwings.

Female meadow brown butterfly.

Meadow browns are on the wing until September or even October if the weather stays warm. They lay their eggs on grasses and over-winter as caterpillars, which may emerge to feed even in winter when the weather is mild.

When meadow browns rest on a flower with their wings closed the males and females have very similar underwings.

They are much larger than small heath butterflies, although the underwings are quite similar.

Meadow brown butterfly on knapweed



This is a male large skipper, one of our smaller butterflies, with a typical wingspan of 1¼ inches (33 mm). Its swept-back wings and size means that it might be mistaken for a moth. A thick black line across each upper fore-wing in males, visible in this photograph, distinguishes them from the females. These are scent scales. Found throughout England and Wales and in parts of southern Scotland, large skippers favour grassy areas. They fly from June until August. A commonly-used food plant is the grass cock's-foot, but eggs are also laid on other grass species.



Large skipper butterfly on catmint

And finally why we should stop using peat

Peat is plant matter, formed from mosses and other plants decaying in very wet conditions where drainage is poor. Peatlands in the UK started forming after the last ice retreat around 10,000 years ago and may now be up to 10 metres deep: an average annual accumulation of only 1 mm in depth. Peatlands are threatened habitats which support many rare and fascinating species, covering 4.5 million acres or 10% of the UK's land area. Only 20% of this area of peat is in good condition: the rest has been damaged by digging, ploughing, draining, burning and over-grazing.

Peat plays a crucial role in attempts to slow the rate of global warming. Peat which is kept wet and undamaged is a significant carbon store. Globally peatlands cover only 3% of the land area (the UK has 13% of the global area of blanket bog), but are estimated to store twice as much carbon as all the world's forests. Conserving and restoring the UK's peatlands is central to our drive to achieve net zero carbon by 2050, our national contribution to limiting further global warming.



Back in 2011 the UK government's Environment White Paper proposed a phasing out of peat use in gardens by 2020 and from the entire horticulture industry by 2030, to be achieved on a voluntary basis, without legislation. Today peat is still widely used in potting compost, grow bags and soil improver, as a quick search on the internet or in any garden centre will reveal. The nation uses nearly 4 million cubic metres of compost each year (or 35 million bags) and in 2020 about 90% of those bags still contained peat.

Bog asphodel growing in a peat bog

Peat is important in combatting one significant impact of climate change: the increasing intensity of storms which bring huge quantities of rainfall in a short time. Peat holds up to 20 times its weight in water, then releases it slowly, like a giant sponge, reducing the severity of flooding. It filters that water too, improving its quality for our water supplies.

The UK Peatland Strategy, published in 2018 for the period to 2040, aims to improve the state of the 80% of the UK's peatland which is damaged. You might have walked across an upland area where deep gullies have been eroded into the peat. In places peatlands are still burnt, sometimes deliberately to improve moorland vegetation for game birds. Carelessness - a discarded glass bottle, a cigarette end thrown from a car or a still-hot disposable barbecue left behind at a picnic place - also causes peat fires. If peat becomes damaged or dry it releases carbon, and is one of the biggest sources of greenhouse gases in the global atmosphere. Rewetting techniques, which include blocking eroded gullies, will ensure that peat once again begins to accumulate, sucking up carbon from the atmosphere as it does so. Reduced grazing intensity restores full vegetation cover, with similar results.

Peat digging for horticulture has largely stopped in the UK, although a few planning permissions are being actively used in Scotland. Recently the Republic of Ireland stopped commercial peat production, but countries like Estonia, Finland and Latvia are still exporting peat to the UK. Perhaps we need reminding that climate change is a global issue?

The campaign group PeatFree April is one of many groups encouraging gardeners to switch to peat-free composts - there are plenty available - or make their own. Make sure that the compost bag clearly states that the contents are peat-free. Look for locally-sourced alternatives - composted wool is getting good reviews - as a better choice than coir which comes from Asia.

By doing so gardeners can play their part in achieving the UK's net zero target for carbon emissions. You can tell your friends about the importance of protecting peat and support those organisations like the National Trust, the Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB which are working to reverse damage to our peatlands.