

How to build a bug hotel



There can be thousands of species of insects and other invertebrates using your garden, but their diversity can be restricted by very tidy gardens, including well-manicured lawns and a lack of dead wood and other objects that provide crevices for the 'bugs' to shelter in. Of course there are invertebrates you might not want in your garden, but maintaining a diversity encourages a balance of pests and benefactors.

You can buy (or make) specialist homes for such beneficial beasts as ladybirds and lacewings, earwigs and bees, or you can build a 'bug hotel' with a range of accommodation and other facilities to suit a wide range of 'clients'. It can add a bit of structure to an otherwise rather plain garden and, with sufficient imagination, you can call it art.

Perhaps the most common form is based on the use of wooden pallets. The idea is first to make a firm flat foundation on which you can sit the edges of a pallet. You can do this with bricks, say piers of two bricks with gaps between the piers that allow access to the space inside. Wooden pallets usually have the top surface with closely adjacent crosspieces and the lower surface with few well-spaced cross members. Lay a wooden pallet upside down on the bricks and then lay more pallets on top, alternate ways up but ensuring the top one is with the top uppermost. About six pallets height is plenty.

As you fit the pallets you need to fill up the spaces between with a range of material that will create nooks and crannies of various sizes and of a variety of materials. The bottom layer between the bricks can include some sand for things to burrow into and some harder material (such as bits of bricks and tile). Off the ground you can use a wide range of recycled materials including dead wood of various sizes, hollow stemmed plants (or even used drinking straws), straw and hay, logs with small holes drilled in them, dry leaves, bark, pine cones, brick/tile/pipe/flower pot rubble. By grouping these materials, various compartments of the structure will appeal to different animals.

The top needs to have some protection, which can be provided by roofing felt or ridge tiles but it is probably good to allow some rain in to the upper levels. There have been experiments with green roofs (turf and other plants) but I'm

not sure how well they will last. Within the structure there needs to be protected dry areas (e.g. below tiles or slates), while generally the structure should be humid with some damper areas.

You will see that a bug hotel can provide a use for many of those miscellaneous bits of material that tend to accumulate in garden corners pending disposal.

As for siting the structure, there are creatures like the bees that like it dry and sunny, but most will be looking for shade. You can position your structure so that parts of it get some sun at some time of day. It is also useful to site the structure close to other wildlife-friendly features such as a hedge or a pond.

Your bug hotel can provide a home or shelter for a wide range of creatures, including frogs, toads and newts – even hedgehogs with a bit of planning, and it may be used for nesting by some birds such as robin or wren.

Searching for ‘bug hotel’ on the internet produces an impressive range of designs, including some that would challenge a lot of architectural designs for humans’ homes, and an array of other products suitable for encouraging wildlife to the garden.

Plumpton Primary School has a bug hotel, which we recently renovated with a lot of help from the children. Armed with pots and trays, the children collected the best part of 40 different kinds of wildlife, all of which we released back into the rebuilt hotel.

The children have also written about the event and the school took some photos (see below).

Tony Hutson and James Otway

Rebuilding our bug hotel

We tried to find minibeasts with these pots. Tony, James and Martin pulled the bug hotel apart! We looked for spiders, woodlice, snails and other insects. It was fun because I got to pick up a snail. The snail had a beautiful shell, it was a baby one. The shell was yellow and black.

The bug hotel was put back together. I am looking forward to seeing lots of snails in there.

Erris McIlwain

We broke the bug hotel apart and we put the bugs into little pots. We found loads of house spiders and three false widow spiders. We also found three snails and around seven cocoons.

Next we built the new bug hotel and put the bugs into their new home. Hopefully we will find more bugs next time.

Freddie Millis

I found woodlice. They tickled my hand. I found slugs and snails, it was fun! I made a bug hotel at home. I got a plastic box and I put leaves in it. Then I put woodlice in it.

Lauren Dejonge

Plumpton Primary School