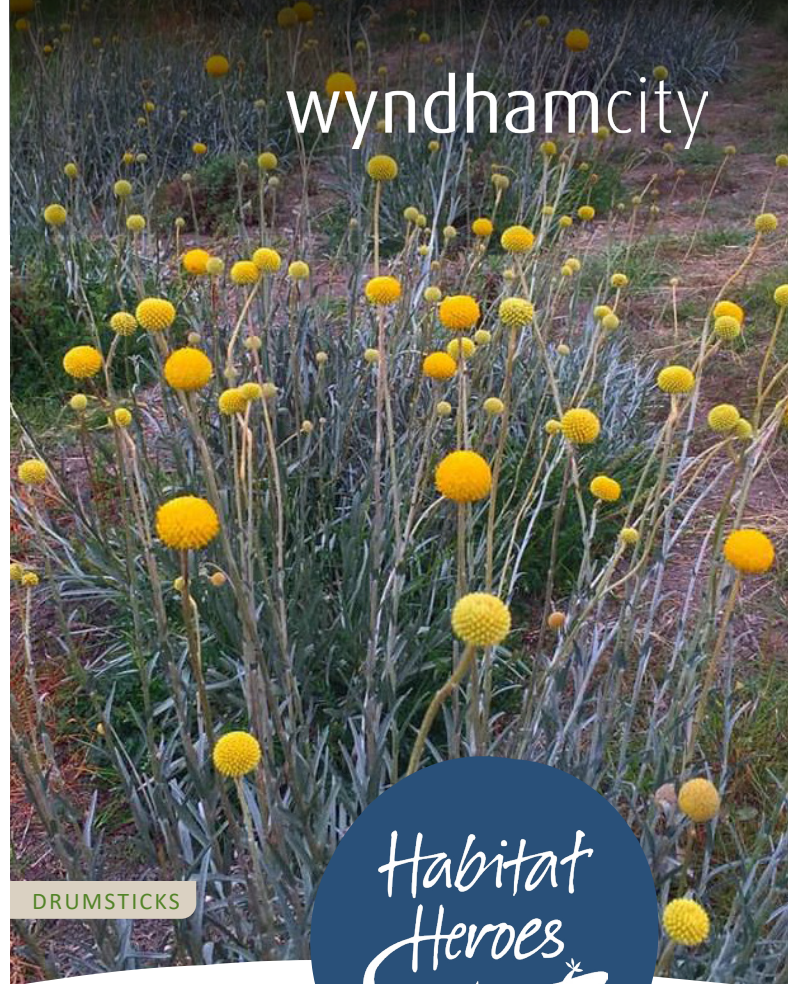




RAINBOW LORIKEET



DRUMSTICKS



Starting a habitat garden

We are drawn to gardening because it connects us with nature. A garden, no matter how big or small, can bring joy and help us to relax and unwind. But often people find gardening a mighty battle, where weeds and pests must be eradicated using chemicals, plants and lawns watered, fertilised, and controlled. Creating a habitat garden – a space planted with hardy, indigenous plants (native to your local area) will make your life easier and turn gardening into a pleasure. Not only will you find indigenous plants simple to grow and manage, your garden will come alive with birds, lizards, bugs, and butterflies.

Imagine your garden filled with beautiful, resilient plants with an abundance of textures, fragrances, and colours. A place where Rainbow Lorikeets clamber among nectar-rich flowers; butterflies dance with wildflowers and small lizards sun themselves on rocks by your backdoor. A wildlife-friendly garden is easy to achieve when you work in harmony with nature, and these simple steps will help you on your way.

I don't know where to begin



1. Go for a walk

When designing your garden, let nature be your guide. Take a stroll through your neighbourhood, study the native plants that thrive locally in gardens and parks as these plants have adapted to the soil and climate conditions in your area. Different plants that grow together using the same soil, air, and water are known as plant communities. When you grow plants that belong in your area and that grow naturally together, you will achieve a thriving, low maintenance garden. If you look closely at plant communities in the wild, notice that there are layers of plants – ground covers and smaller plants like grasses and wildflowers, larger shrubs and bushes and an overstory of trees. Plants don't exist in isolation with bare earth around them so when you provide a continuous layer of vegetation from the ground level to the treetops, you are creating a garden where animals can shelter, visit and make their homes.

2.

Start by your door and start small

A small area can be more manageable when starting out and placing your new plants close to the house will ensure you keep an eye on them as they establish. Ideally, you want your garden hose to reach your new plants, but if it doesn't, simply place a watering-can near your door and be prepared to water the young plants by hand.



3.

Don't remove all your existing plants

You do not need to remove all existing plants to start your new wildlife friendly garden. Keeping large plants and shrubs in your garden will protect young seedlings as they establish and help keep weeds down. You can then remove or transplant unwanted plants once your new seedlings have grown. A quick and easy way to enhance your garden is to prune the lower branches of your trees and shrubs and underplant them with native ground covers and wildflowers. Indigenous plants can be purchased as tube stock from your local Indigenous nursery. These smaller plants will adapt quicker to the conditions of your garden and within a season they will grow to the same height or bigger than larger nursery plants that have been raised a green house.

4. Make your soil happy

Your soil does not have to resemble potting mix. If you have 4- 5% organic matter in your soil, there is no need for amendments. Plants that are indigenous to your area will thrive in the natural local soil types and adapt to your garden conditions. Simply add a handful of light compost to the soil when planting and a sprinkle of slow release native fertiliser or aged animal manure (cow or sheep). This will give the seedlings the boost they need to adapt to their new environment.

5.

Don't break your back

Unless your soil is severely compacted there is no need to dig or till your soil. Double digging is a back-breaking method which involves removing layers of soil from the bed, mixing it with soil amendments and replacing it back into the garden. This method can destroy the natural soil layers and creates perfect conditions for weeds and invasive species.



6.

Ditch the pebbles and use plants instead

Pebbles do not aid plant growth or soil health, instead they hold heat and raise the soil temperature leading to stressed, thirsty plants which will then require regular removal of dead leaves and plant debris. A medium chunky bark mulch (applied at 50- 75mm thick) provides ideal growing conditions for native plants. It keeps the soil cool and moist, prevents weeds and can reduce watering by 60 per cent. Start your new garden with a layer of mulch but aim to cover the soil with plants such as groundcovers and wildflowers over the long term. Ground covers will discourage weeds better than pebbles and mulch, and once established will require far less work than mulch which breaks down and must be replenished or replaced each year. Planting groundcovers and low shrubs along the border will stop birds flicking mulch out of the garden.

7.

Use natural pest control



GARDEN SKINK



BLUE-TONGUE LIZARD

One of the most important and most vulnerable wildlife species that you can welcome to your garden are lizards. Urban lizard populations are on the decline due to loss of habitat but if you encourage and protect these little creatures in your garden, they will help control pests and bugs for you naturally. Little skinks and geckos feed on insects, while larger lizards such as the Blue-tongue will devour slugs and snails.

Encourage lizards to your garden by planting tussock grasses and groundcovers such as Flax Lilies (*Dianella spp*), Purple Coral Pea (*Hardenbergia violacea*), Wallaby Grass (*Rytidosperma spp*) and Ruby Saltbush (*Enchylaena tomentosa*). Logs, twigs, large pieces of bark and old earthenware pipes will provide shelter for lizards whilst a shallow dish of water along with a flat rock or brick for basking will encourage lizards to stay.

Keep your lizards happy - avoid raking up your leaf litter and mulch and do not use chemicals, pesticides, non-organic fertilisers, or snail pellets in your garden. Chemicals can kill lizards and they won't come to your garden if there are no bugs or snails to eat.

The prospect of designing a garden can be daunting but growing wildlife friendly plants is just as easy as filling your garden with introduced flowers, shrubs, trees, and lawns. The difference is that indigenous plants require less watering, fertilisers and pesticides and will improve the environment, meet the specific needs of local wildlife, and restore the health of your soil. Gardening with plants that are adapted to your climate will thrive with a little routine care and give you confidence to grow your skills as a gardener.