



## Steve Thorpe Gardening Contract and maintenance work Working in Schools, businesses and the Community.

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### **Making and development of a school nature/wildlife garden**

The introduction of the vegetable growing area had opened up so many new windows for everyone at Haworth Primary School. Well the development of the nature garden had the same enormous impact, especially on the amount of curriculum work that can be done in such an environment.

Once again we started with a small area at the side of the school. It is so important not to over face everyone with the size of the task, taking all the pleasure out of the project and not giving the children ownership of it.

We put a small pond half way down the new nature garden. Ours was a plastic moulded pond, so we put grass right up to the edges so that the plastic couldn't be seen. At first everyone frowns when you mention water and ponds in a school garden, but once again I feel there is a safe way of doing everything. Obviously if it is a large pond consideration has to be given to fencing the area in and having a gate that only designated people have a key to. In our case we put layers of stones in the way of 2 bricks with a flat stone across the top. We built these up until the last one was only about ½ inch below the water. As well as making this a child safe pond it also gives the frogs lots of layers to hide under when they are feeling threatened. During the first spring frogs came and made the pond their home laying their spawn and we soon had about a dozen frogs in residence. The nursery did a project on the life cycle of the frog and having the facility in their own school grounds made it a lot easier and much more fun.



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We then put a seat at the side of the pond and planted buddleias at each side of it to attract the butterflies. We let the wild nettles grow behind the seat, which also attract the butterflies but yet were in an area where the small children weren't going to get stung. This has made a really peaceful area for the children to sit and watch the frogs and butterflies at break and lunchtimes, or to carry out their curriculum work.



We have numerous log piles throughout the nature garden. These make a brilliant home for all the insects and mini beasts and are brilliant areas for classes to do lots more curriculum work. They are also brilliant for attracting hedgehogs into the school garden, which together with the frogs make a wonderful organic control for all those juicy slugs that run riot throughout the garden.

These insects and animals in the school garden are so important and form what is called an ecosystem. Each animal and plant has a part to play in making your garden work and they all rely on each other to stay healthy and well. This is another good reason to be organic and avoid using pesticides which kill more of the things you don't want to than the ones you do.

We then put nesting boxes up in the trees in and around the nature garden and bat boxes under the school guttering that faces onto the garden. We put a bird table at the side of the seat and one at the bottom of the garden which the children keep topped up with fat balls and wild bird seed. This really attracts the birds to the nature garden and encourages them to use the nesting boxes and make it their home. It is important not to put the feeding stations too near the nesting as this can encourage visiting birds to attack the birds living in the boxes.



You can get small cameras to put in the nesting boxes that enable the children to watch every step from the birds building their nests right through to their fledglings leaving the nest. Once again having all these birds in your school garden is a brilliant organic method of getting rid of lots of unwanted pests like slugs, greenfly etc.

Opposite the pond and seat we have a small banking which we developed into a wild flower garden. This has added so much colour to the area with so many different varieties of wild flower and once again attracts so much wildlife. We used a pictorial meadow mixture which we



just leave to die back and re seed at the end of the summer. It is then cut back and cleared at the end of autumn in readiness for next year's growing season. It is good to have an area that is not too rich and fertile as this can make so the weeds overpower the wild flowers during their development. Our area was quite stony and barren so it made an ideal area to start our project.

After a couple of years we decided to turn the large area behind the school into a community nature walk/garden. This land links the school to the community centre so this new facility can be used by the whole community. We received a grant to create winding paths throughout the area to form the nature walk and added seats to give people the opportunity to sit and take in the view or just rest. We decided to make a hard standing path as opposed to one covered in tree bark because of concerns of the possibility of glass and needles becoming mixed in with the bark. We put a membrane down



to stop future weed growth which was covered in hard core. This was rolled down and then a layer of 20mm to dust was added and rolled in to really compact the area. The children had a real hands on roll throughout the project

We added new groups of trees to compliment the existing ones and these will close the area in even further in years to come to make it a haven for all the wild animals. We have already had a mother deer and her two young regularly visiting the nature garden which shows what we are doing must be working. What a nice feeling it is when the children come running up saying that deer are in the school grounds.

Probably the one thing I am most proud of in our new nature garden is the outdoor classroom that I have made and developed. We looked carefully for a group of mature trees that were close to the new path and would be easily accessible for all age groups. We had about a dozen wooden mushroom seats made that the children concreted into the ground. We put a big one for the teacher to sit on and then put the others in locations that were visible for both teacher and children alike. We then put groups of logs throughout the outdoor classroom that can be moved about by members of the class. Altogether the classroom seats about 30 children and makes an ideal place for story time or any outdoor curriculum work.