

Wildlife Gardening

Lessons from a suburban front yard in Summer

Over summer, a fascinating array of insect life visited the wildlife garden at the Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC) depot in East Brunswick. Their presence in the garden illustrates some valuable principles of wildlife gardening.

Plants and animals – ancient bonds

Indigenous plants and animals have co-evolved over millions of years, and discovering these one-on-one ecological relationships is one of the joys of planting local. Flax-lilies (*Dianella*) allow us to witness one of these relationships, 'buzz pollination'. The lily flowers hold pollen tightly within in-rolled anthers, only releasing it to insects that have learnt to vibrate the anthers at high frequency. This fascinating pollination method has shaped the *Dianella* flowers and the behaviour of native bees till they are exquisitely attuned to each other's needs. Over summer, Miner Bees (*Lasioglossum*) were hard at work shaking the anthers of Flax-lily flowers, occasionally joined by their more famous relatives, the [Blue-banded Bees](#), *Ameqilla*.

Animals need structure in their life

Animals need more from a garden than plant foods... structures and layout are also crucial.

Placing a log, paving or boulder in an area of the garden that receives morning sun in the summer will create a 'lizard lounge'; a basking site that helps cold-blooded animals function. These are not just for lizards: in the depot garden, a sunny boulder acted like a passive solar battery for Red Percher Dragonflies, readying their powerful wing muscles for chasing insect prey.

Some animals are picky about their perches. Over several weeks, a male Resin Bee could be observed attached to the same slender flower stem of Black-anther Flax-lily... the stem made a safe resting site from larger predators. A second male Resin Bee soon joined the first and the two could be seen wriggling. This behaviour suggests the prominent perch also plays a role in courtship, perhaps by helping attract the attention of passing females. The dead Flax-lily stems are a popular venue for tiny creatures in our garden ecosystem; don't be tempted to tidy them away too soon.

Messy garden? Congratulations!

When it comes to wildlife gardening, a bit of mess is a sign of success! Unlike a traditional garden, the aim of wildlife garden is to see your plants chewed, bored, sucked or otherwise besieged by as many native animals as possible. During a visit to the nearby CERES nursery in May, grubs of the Bottlebrush Sawfly were seen feeding on tubestock of River Bottlebrush *Callistemon sieberi*. The poor plants were very munched, leaving elegant leaf skeletons. In summer I was delighted to see one of the colourful adult sawflies resting in the MCMC depot garden. The adult Sawfly, (not a fly but actually a vegetarian relative of wasps), is harmless, despite its alarming appearance. An attack by sawfly larvae can thoroughly defoliate a bottlebrush or paperbark, however the plant usually soon recovers.

Why not develop a wildlife garden and have 'nearby nature' at your own front door?

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Miner Bee collecting pollen from a *Dianella* flower.



Red Percher Dragonfly warming up on boulder.



Resin bee males perched on *Dianella* stems.



Bottlebrush sawfly larva



Bottlebrush sawfly adult