



THERE IS ARGUABLY no better place than the Netherlands to get a good idea of the creative potential offered by nature gardens. Perhaps because space in this densely populated country has always been at a premium, a significant strand in Dutch garden planning has emerged that seeks to maximise the value to wildlife of small spaces, while attaching equal importance to producing a sense of natural freedom, beauty and fascination for all ages. The aim, in a phrase used by many people involved with these gardens is 'to

integrate nature with garden art' – to marry horticultural creativity and an artistic sense with ecological principles.

Forget the tinkering around at the edges that seems to typify much wildlife gardening elsewhere; the Dutch approach can be radical. The work and gardens of three groups and individuals typify this Dutch nature scene: designer and artist Hans Carlier, urban nature expert Arie Koster, and Willy Leufgen and Marianne van Lier, who set up the Oase Foundation, a national network for designers and managers of nature gardens.

Wildlife tower blocks

In a striking example of making full use of space where it is at a premium, sometimes the best option is to go vertical, in the same way that inner city tower blocks squeeze the maximum use from a given area of land. The wildlife equivalent, the 'Creature Tower', has been pioneered by artist and garden designer Hans Carlier. His structures provide living space and feeding opportunities for a range of animals, but are intended to be both sculptural and practical. As well as being featured in Carlier's own gardens, they are



WILD ABOUT THE COMMUNITY This communal garden designed by Hans Carlier in the town of Zutphen, near Arnhem in the east of the Netherlands, includes an imposing 'Creature Tower' (left). Made from recycled materials, it provides roosting for bats and living space for invertebrates. Public and private green space is linked in the town, where nature often comes right up to the front door (above). Quieter areas prove natural planting can be every bit as beautiful as those based on exotic, non-native species (below left)

Artistic ecology

Recent developments in natural gardening in the Netherlands represent an exciting future for wildlife gardening, where art is applied to ecological ideas to produce gardens with real meaning and purpose, believes NIGEL DUNNETT



PHOTOGRAPHS: MARIANNE MAIERUS

beginning to appear elsewhere. They can combine several wildlife-promoting features at once, such as bee hotels, bird tables, nest boxes and hedgehog houses (see box, p356). Depending on their craftsmanship, wildlife towers can be rudimentary structures that fade into the background, or strongly artistic focal points, painted bright colours.

One of the best known of Hans' structures is in a community garden he designed for a settlement of 50 dwellings in the town of Zutphen. This is a stacked structure of reclaimed materials, set amid vegetated rubble

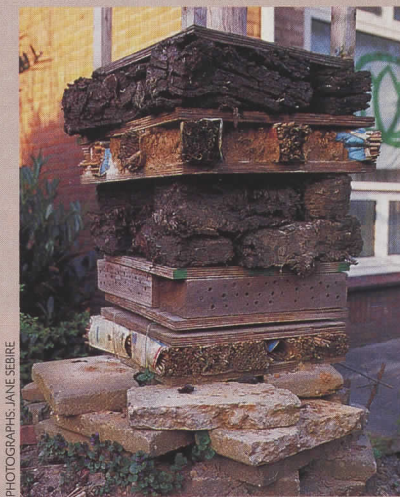
piles that, as well as providing bat-roosting space, is a really attractive focal point in the garden (main picture). The residents of this development are all signed-up to the ecological idea and help maintain the space.

Such community courtyard nature spaces are not uncommon in the Netherlands, representing an exciting ideal where backyards and gardens link with community spaces and parks, producing green connecting elements in the city. Patches of linked habitats are of much greater value to wildlife than the sum of individual, isolated ➤ **357**



BEE HOTELS AND CREATURE TOWERS

Arie Koster's combination of horticultural experience, educational work and scientific training as an ecologist make him (far right) a tireless and effective advocate of the social benefits of contact with nature in cities. He spends much of his time visiting nature sites across the Netherlands, advising on their development. He is an acknowledged expert on wild bees, and stresses their importance to the health of urban ecosystems as they pollinate such a wide range of plants. His garden contains a range of 'bee hotels' designed to provide nesting sites for solitary (non-hive-living) bees. These bees live naturally in holes bored in dead wood. Artificial nesting sites can be made by drilling holes in blocks of wood, providing piles of dead wood, or



PHOTOGRAPHS: JANE SEBIRE

bundles of tubular material, such as dried reeds, bamboo canes or even drinking straws. Arie's structures, with the complexity of their construction and materials also make strong and unusual visual features in the garden (above).

Hans Carlier's creature towers are similar, but usually constructed around a central pole (typically around 2m/6½ft in height), fixed securely into the ground. The base of many is a chamber formed from an upturned bucket. With an



entrance hole cut and disguised with soil, it is suitable for hedgehogs or amphibians. Next comes a layer of bricks or broken paving for invertebrates, a layer of tubes for a bee hotel, perhaps an open layer (created with two circles of

plywood) for a bird table, topped by a nest box and perhaps a thatched or green roof. The size, number of layers and appearances vary widely; they can blend into their surroundings or be brightly painted to make a feature out of them.



PHOTOGRAPHS: JANE SEBIRE

URBAN WILDLIFE SPECIALIST In his garden at Veenendaal, between Utrecht and Arnhem, Arie Kostner combines wild and cultivated plants and recycled materials to create a series of small-scale habitats, managed with an eye to their artistic impact as well as their ability to encourage wildlife.

The front garden (above, main picture) contains dry-meadow wild flowers, growing on recycled rubble that also provides a habitat for many invertebrates. In the back garden are several bee hotels (see box, left) and a small pond (above, left) as well as a boggy area of sphagnum moss and miniature marsh. The meadow contains large numbers of attractive, annual *Rhinanthus minor* (yellow rattle) and *R. serotinus* (narrow-leaved rattle), which are semi-parasitic on meadow grasses, reducing their vigour and so allowing more delicate wild flowers such as orchids (above right) to compete better with the grass

parts. Some of these courtyards (Utrecht and Arnhem have some of the best) are idyllic places, combining play areas for children with flower-filled allotments and native-rich habitat plantings including meadows, wetland and woodland.

Arie Koster

On the face of it, Arie Koster's home in the town of Veenendaal, between Utrecht and Arnhem in the south of the Netherlands, could be typical of any 1970s semi-detached house in a British suburb. An energetic and enthusiastic proponent of wild spaces in cities, Arie was to be seen on seemingly endless backwards and forwards journeys on his bicycle pulling a large trailer full of plants on each trip to stock the new garden when he first moved in 10 years ago. Suddenly, a large pile of rubble and bricks was dumped in the front garden. To the neighbourhood's general surprise, this was Arie's new front garden.

With some shaping and stacking of the material, it became a sculptural alternative to a rock garden – free draining for the growth of dry meadow plants, with plenty of habitat for invertebrates in the spaces in the rubble and bricks (main picture).

The use of rubble and other recycled materials – bricks, old paving slabs and tiles – piled into stacked structures, is common in Dutch nature gardens. In a country with little or no outcrops of bedrock, it is a straightforward way of creating informal rock gardens and stony landscapes, and fits well with ecological ideas of reducing waste. It stems from the anarchistic gardening ideas of Louis Le Roy who, during the 1970s, encouraged people to take over public space and create a new sort of 'urban wilderness' with tipped and stacked recycled waste materials, woodlands of mixed native and garden trees, and food-producing gardens as alternatives to the usual manicured parks.

Using wild flowers

Arie's back garden is made up of a series of mini-habitats. In effect it takes the form of a woodland glade; its boundaries are planted up loosely with trees and shrubs, and a small central lawn gives way to a larger area of



meadow around a central *Prunus avium* (wild cherry tree). There is also a small pool and sphagnum bog, surrounded by a miniature marsh. The garden is beautiful in spring with its boundary beds planted in stylised communities of woodland ground flora – such as large drifts of *Anemone nemorosa* (wood anemone), *Corydalis solida* (corydalis), *Primula elatior* (oxlip) and *Primula vulgaris* (primrose) in groupings to maximise their pictorial effect.

The use of native wild flowers to produce dramatic pictures rather than slavishly trying to re-create naturally occurring native-plant

communities is again typically Dutch, and is perhaps best expressed in the Heem Parks of Amstelveen near Amsterdam (see *The Garden*, March, pp208–15). Arie Kostner has adapted the same ideas for use on a smaller, domestic scale to great effect.

Interested parties

The task of providing a point of contact and information exchange for all these sites is undertaken by the Oase Foundation, co-ordinated by Willy Leufgen and Marianne van Lier. In 1986 they were given a job

together looking after the Heemtuin nature garden at Muntendam near Groningen in the north of the Netherlands, where the integration of ecology with garden art and craft captured their imagination. Now, as well as publishing a quarterly magazine for designers, growers, managers and educationalists, and running excursions and study tours for subscribers to the magazine, they also publish a full-colour guide to 170 publicly accessible Dutch nature gardens.

Essential to all these activities is the garden that Marianne and Willy have created around

The Oase Garden, Kloosterstraat 5A, 6642 KW Beuningen, is open to individual visitors May–September. Groups of 6–15 visitors need to e-mail beforehand to: (oasenet@wish.nl). Admission is €3.50, including tea or coffee



POCKETS OF CALM The Oase Garden near Arnhem was created by Marianne van Lier and Willy Leufgen to demonstrate the integration of ecology with garden art. Eye-catching features abound, such as this 'fantasy' stacked construction of bricks, tiles and clay pipes (above): all rejects from a local brick factory, and all colonised by a rich invertebrate fauna. A large 'butterfly hill' – around 200sq m (240sq yd) of tipped rubble – is planted with a self-sustaining (and self-sowing) mix of meadow species and perennials including verbascons, evening primrose and the wonderfully strange *Tragopogon pratensis* (goat's beard).

Recycled-brick paths and bridges (main picture, left) wind their way through the lush summer planting, predominantly of native species such as *Leucanthemum vulgare* (ox-eye daisy)



PHOTOGRAPHS: MARIANNE MAJERUS

MARGINAL OASIS The centrepiece of the Oase Garden is an artificial, but remarkably natural-looking, lake. Its wide, shallow, marshy margins are illuminated in early summer by breath-taking sweeps of *Dactylorhiza majalis* (broad-leaved marsh orchid), a widespread but increasingly rare orchid native to much of Europe

a converted 19th-century monastery near Arnhem. Their office and library is a place where people can visit, research and discuss plans to realise projects themselves and the surrounding garden is an important demonstration of just what is possible.

The Oase Garden (the name is Dutch for 'oasis') has been created over the past 10 years or so and is designed around a beautiful yet artificial lake and canal. Reclaimed and recycled materials again feature strongly. As well as woodland areas, planted for spring wild flowers, and for fruit for birds, the garden

contains a number of meadow plots sown with different seed mixtures. Some are full of colourful annuals and traditional tall wheat cultivars, while others are largely self-maintaining mixes of perennial wild flowers. The garden is looked after primarily by Willy, with help from other residents from the monastery, as well as visiting volunteers and students.

For me, these predominantly green yet colourful Dutch gardens with their minimal use of hard surfacing, extensive use of recycled materials and judicious mixes of native and non-native plants represent an exciting future

for ecologically-informed gardening. It is precisely because this modern gardening style integrates ecological science with garden art so well that it moves beyond the concept of re-creating wilderness areas. We can learn from such gardens; they are highly managed, artificial interpretations of nature, but seem far more meaningful and satisfying than gardens produced for ornament alone. ♪

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