



Six-spot Burnets are day-flying moths sometimes seen in gardens.

Gardening for moths

Everyone wants a garden abuzz with pollinators, but they don't all fly by day. **Jenny Steel** explains how to garden specifically for moths.

Most wildlife gardeners are keen to encourage butterflies to their borders, and a growing number are also trying to help moths. These are not all the dull, brown insects that many people imagine – they come in a range of amazing colours from bright yellow or red to pink, green and orange. Many have wonderful markings; others are brilliantly camouflaged to enable them to blend in on the bark of a tree or amongst leaves. In fact many species of these winged insects are as colourful, if not more so, than our most beautiful native butterflies, and their caterpillars may also be brightly coloured, patterned or superbly camouflaged. Complex and intricate life cycles make these insects even more fascinating.

Providing nectar plants for adult moths may seem like the obvious way to help these insects, but this is not necessarily the best way to encourage them. There are some, including the huge and colourful Lime Hawkmoth and Eyed Hawkmoth, that don't feed at all during their adult 'winged' stage; they do



not have functioning mouthparts and survive for just a few short weeks without feeding. Their purpose is to mate and lay eggs.

Growing larval food plants is a much more effective way of encouraging a wide range of moths. Native wildflowers in particular, including champions, bedstraws, Foxgloves, vetches and Hedge Woundwort, as well as wild grasses and a few weedy plants such as plantains or Dandelions, will cater for the caterpillars of a range of species. Growing native shrubs including Hawthorn, dogwoods, willows and Dog Rose will also support the larvae of many moths. Include Rosebay Willowherb if you love the Elephant Hawkmoth, dandelions for the White Ermine moth, and the stunning Garden Tiger feeds on a wide range of herbaceous plants. For those that do feed as adults, including the burnet moths and Silver Y, wildflowers such as Purple Loosestrife and knapweeds are useful nectar sources.

Making sure that your garden has places for moths to overwinter is also vital. Many spend the winter in their pupal form, often in the top layer of garden soil, or amongst leaves and plant debris on the ground, so leaving borders well alone through the winter is advisable if you want to encourage plenty of different species of these beautiful insects into your garden.

Jenny Steel is a plant ecologist, author of several books on wildlife gardening and has been a Garden BirdWatcher for 21 years!

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Jenny's books can be bought online from her website.

