

Nature Notes

Make life easy for the birds in your garden

I have been visiting friends up north. They have recently moved house and their new garden is brilliant.

It has an area for the kids to ride their bikes on, an artistic looking fruit tree, thick bushes, ivy and some larger trees next door. There are several fruit bushes growing along in beds along the wall and underneath the fruit tree is a wild area. The garden is teeming with birds.

I made a fact card for their six-year-old daughter Megan about one of the trees you can see from the window.

It was an ash. I drew it bare to show the bunches of keys (the seeds) that hang throughout the winter then did a close-up of the black buds and what the leaves will look like in summer. When we went out for a drive to the seaside later for chips and sand castles, the whole family was tree spotting out of the window.

They have a ritual at breakfast. Crusts are broken into smaller pieces for the birds before you can leave the table. It was distributing these offerings in the garden that I began musing on how I would discuss their bird feeders.

You see, not being in the know, they had bought those nets of nuts and fat balls and hung them as they were from the washing line. Bad for two reasons: one, wildlife can get tangled in the empty nets and two the washing line was too open for the birds to feel comfortable.

The solution involved a trip to an RSPB reserve just around the corner. The children's grandparents had bought them membership so that they could visit the reserve for free whenever they liked. At the moment they don't go much further than the playground but as they get bigger they'll be able to explore further and further. I bought them three different types of basic feeders for nuts, seeds and fat balls and we chose which type of seed would be best for the birds they get.

When we got back, we spent some quality time emptying the mesh sacks into the feeders, filling up the seed and then deciding where on the fruit tree would be best to hang them.

Before we had even taken our wellies off, there was an excited cry from their mum, "something's on the feeders".

We rushed to the window and sure enough a blue tit was already there. I told them how important their garden was because it had sparrows and starlings and they needed extra special looking after because times were tough for them and we spent a happy half hour watching for other things before deciding to make a list. Then with no prompting, Megan said: "Can I tally them? You tell me how many and I will write it down".

As we did that, I explained about RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch and how she could be part of a huge national survey that will help to work out which birds are doing well and which, like the sparrows and starlings, are not. They are now signed up and I feel the sparrow is ever so slightly safer.

Thank you to everyone who took part in the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch, don't forget to send in your results.

For more information on feeding your garden birds visit the RSPB's website: <http://www.rspb.org.uk/advice/helping-birds/feeding/index.aspx>

Rebecca Neal, lifelong learning officer
RSPB Birmingham

Harvesting books

Graham Young emerges himself in Dickens and Proust at the West Midlands' largest second hand bookshop

It is said that you should never judge a book by its cover – but keen readers Vivienne Mills and Sarah Exley have learned that the same applies to people, too.

Whenever customers walk into their shop the pair can never second-guess them.

"It's always interesting to see the mix of stuff that people buy," says Vivienne. "I'll think: 'I would never have chosen that for him'.

"Or you'll find that the scruffiest person will buy the dearest book and the well-heeled won't. And some people will be buying books by Proust when you'd look at them and think they wouldn't even be able to read."

What makes their job even more exciting is that they own what is joyously called Astley Book Farm. And on that farm are 75,000 books in 4,000 sq ft of enjoyably maze-like corridors, complete with children's hayloft and "ten bob barn".

By their reckoning, this makes them the owners of the Midlands' largest second hand book store.

With room to expand and new customers seeking out their seven-year-old treasure trove all the time, who knows how far their literary adventures will take them?

But the nice thing about Astley Book Farm is that it's a genuine heritage business.

As well as incorporating their business and Vivienne's farmhouse accommodation, the wider 6,000-acre estate was also the 1819 birthplace of Victorian author George Eliot.

So when the women applied for planning permission to convert some old cow sheds into a book shop the change of use was quickly rubber stamped.

Today, its specialist collectors' stocks include first edition copies by timeless authors including Eliot and Charles Dickens – but no Mills & Boon despite Vivienne's surname.

"We're not that far from anywhere," she says. "But we have to sell good stuff because people make a special effort to get here.

Although you can already buy biscuits and teas and coffees on site already, a new coffee shop will open in time for Easter ready to sell provisions from a 130-year-old bakery in nearby Bedworth.

This will be a good reason for more customers to



Astley Book Farm owners Sarah Exley and Vivienne Mills with their huge collection

travel further and to stay longer, to meet like-minded people and even, perhaps, to attend special events as the store's reputation spreads.

The book farm even hosted a panto earlier this month and the May and August bank holiday weekends will again feature discount sales in a marketplace.

Vivienne says: "We have had some celebrity visitors, too, including Jeremy Beadle, who came a few times before he died."

Because the counter is at the front door, every customer is greeted with a friendly welcome and expert advice.

Polesworth-based Sarah's accountancy skills manage the business in every sense. She's also the main buyer and in each year around a third of the farm's 75,000 stock is likely to be sold.

The women recently took delivery of 15,000 books from a bereaved family, but stocks are usually sourced in small numbers to maintain quality and diversity and to ensure that none are ever sent to landfill.

Vivienne left school after her A levels and eventually became a deputy store manager for Sainsbury's. Son Adam, 24, is a PE teacher.

With husband Stephen looking after the book farm's constant odd job needs, the thriving business has solid foundations despite the shifting nature of retailing and the book market in particular.

Helping to ensure that every need can be met, ex-

pert book binder Judith Sherwood is also on site repairing valuable family heirlooms or treasured reads.

Vivienne bemoans the lack of specialised bookshops in Birmingham, but it's one reason why Astley Book Farm has flourished when many of the pair's friends questioned their original plans.

"Some said we were mad," admits Vivienne.

A double Godiva Award winner for best new business (2005) and best shop in Coventry and Warwickshire (2007), Astley Book Farm also trades on various internet sites including Amazon and eBay.

Vivienne admits the human element of book selling can be hugely rewarding.

"You generally find the people who come here are in quite a good mood," she smiles.

"They might come to escape the World Cup, or this year, something like the Royal Wedding.

"Some want to look at our railway or military books and not be interested in anything else.

"The coffee shop will be handy because a wife might have found what she wants and she'll be saying to her husband: 'How much longer are you going to be?' She will be able to have a drink with her book while he keeps looking."

→ **Astley Book Farm, Astley Lane, Bedworth.**
www.astleybookfarm.com

Prepare the ground for spring

Garden Watch

Gardening in February is very much determined by the weather and as this is usually our coldest month it brings many challenges too.

If you require confirmation that the season is changing, have a wander round your garden to look for buds that are beginning to swell, but keep off the damp grass to avoid compaction of the soil and damage to the leaves. With the ground so damp, it is better to work from a plank to spread your weight over a wider surface.

Hard frosts are still commonplace and we need to be vigilant to protect vulnerable (non-hardy) plants. Ensure that any shrubs and trees, especially those newly planted or shallow rooted, haven't been lifted by the frost and gently re-firm them if required.

A pruning session will capture any late summer-flowering shrubs that need a little rejuvenation. Ensure that any dead or diseased material is cut out and remove about one third of the stems to encourage new growth. Any healthy wood that is removed can be kept to use as inconspicuous plant supports or should be shredded to use as mulch later in the spring.

As the sap begins to rise, one activity that will really support the forthcoming growth would be to dig in some organic fertiliser, such as chicken manure pellets. The slow release of these nutrients is key to prevent too much of a growth surge when there is still so much frost about.

Early veg can be sown indoors in plastic modules, before they are planted outdoors under cloches. Choose appropriately from the many varieties of lettuce, radish, salad onions, beetroot and broad beans available at your local garden centre. Place them in the lightest area available as they need to maximise the daylight, otherwise the

seedlings will rush to seek out the light they need and will become too tall and leggy. Light can be enhanced by placing tin foil behind the seedlings. Peas can be planted in a plastic gutter, with aeration holes at the bottom and when they are ready to be transplanted they can just slide out from the gutter straight into a shallow trench in the ground. If you cover the ground now with black plastic, where all these early veg will be planted out, you will allow the earth to warm up and this will be less of a shock to the young plants.

David Hitchman, Notcutts garden centre manager. www.notcutts.co.uk/solihull/