

THE BIRD-FRIENDLY GARDEN

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There are good birds and bad birds. Some birds are thugs, others mass murderers. The worst thugs are Indian mynahs. They chase most other birds away and can beat up even large birds like king parrots and white cockatoos. Mynahs are also amongst the smartest animals on Earth. They can learn to talk, fit in almost anywhere and eat almost anything. Some twit introduced them to Australia in 1883 to control insects in sugar cane plantations.

But native birds can be thugs too. Wattlebirds can be very aggressive and territorial. Noisy miners and their close relatives, the bellbirds, can chase almost every other bird species away. Charming as the bellbirds may sound, they create a bleak neighbourhood with few bird species and often sick gum trees. Bellbirds spread and eat (ie farm) lerp-forming species of sap-sucking insects called psyllids, which can gradually kill gum trees by sucking all of the goodness out of their leaves.

And when grandpa feeds the kookas, is he aware that feeding kookaburras, currawongs, magpies or butcher birds can be an environmental disaster? These carnivores prosper with hand-feeding and eat the babies of small bird species in the area. Blue wrens, silvereyes, finches – all of these charming creatures are devoured by the out-of-control populations of meat-eating birds.

All a bit depressing, isn't it? Well not really. What has emerged in recent years is that we ordinary punters can easily steer the local bird populations. We can balance the bird species and ensure that native species develop a lasting foothold in suburbia and on farms.

Better Design

How? Well it is clear now that our choice of garden design, plant selection and which birds we feed has a dramatic effect on the bird species in an area. Indian mynahs, noisy miners, sparrows, turtledoves, feral pigeons and starlings (all introduced pests except the noisy miner) love open, grassy or paved areas dotted with trees. They hate densely planted shrubberies – they want wide open spaces. So, at home, narrower lawn areas means fewer avian pests.

Bird Balancing

So, how do you get a practical and pretty garden that is bird-balanced? First of all, minimise paving. Paving is wildlife-unfriendly. And divide the garden into outdoor rooms. This creates usable areas to entertain in, play sport in, grow vegies in, etc. Divide these areas up with narrow beds of shrubs (see the attached garden design).

You will notice on my bird-friendly garden design that there are no large, open areas. The lawn is created in strips no wider than 3-4 metres, rather than big circles or squares. There is still room for kids to play cricket, footy, basketball or to ride bikes. You still have a swimming pool onto which opens a glorious pavilion for outdoor cooking, entertaining or even as a rainy day play area for the kids. You still have a shed, a cubby house or an aviary. And you have room for a vegie garden.

Best Plants

There are no prickly or ugly plants in this garden design. All of the plants either flower well or produce excellent foliage. You have the best variety of bottlebrushes, kangaroo paws, grevilleas, banksias, Gynea lilies, grass trees and seeding weeds which all feed wild birds. The lilly pilly *Syzygium francisii* 'Hobbit' is our best privacy plant of all, and it grows well everywhere, except in Australia's coldest areas. It reaches around 2.5m tall and wide, is very dense, looks superb and hardly, if ever, needs pruning. If 'Hobbit' is unavailable in your area, any hardy dwarf lilly pilly will do – especially dwarf *Acmenas*. Most lilly pillies grow far too tall and force you to spend your life pruning them. 'Hobbit' and the miniature *baeckeas* are outstanding nesting plants for birds – they are very dense and have lots of forks for nests. Neither are prickly. The *Austromyrtus* I have suggested for areas down the sides is a lilly pilly relative and very pretty. In some areas *Austromyrtuses* get ravaged by Myrtle Rust – if yours is one of these areas, use smallish banksias instead.

Banksias are critical food sources for many nectar-feeding birds as they flower in autumn-winter when little else flowers. If you don't like any of the plant groups you could grow paper-barks. 'The Summer' series of gum trees – ie, 'Summer Red', 'Summer Beauty', etc – are also excellent backyard trees. These are possibly our best flowering trees and quite small, too (5-7m). The Queensland firewheel tree (*Stenocarpus sinuatus*) is stunning. All of these plants attract and feed birds. Obviously, you would substitute some plants with others that are more suited to your climate in some areas of Australia (no design can suit everywhere). Your local nursery should be easily able to help you.

Soils for Natives

If you can, please don't buy any commercially-available soils, particularly in Sydney and Brisbane, where these soils are problematic when they are sourced from alluvial silts. Your own soil from your own block of land is far better, even if it is very clayey.

If you must buy extra soil, get crushed rock. Most crushed rocks are far better for growing native plants than bought soils. Remember that native plants live in broken-down rock out in the bush. They do not live in the alluvial silts that many landscape supply companies sell.

Crushed rock is often sold as road base. Fear not. Sandstone road base is excellent for growing native plants, as are most other crushed rocks. Crushed limestone and old concrete are too alkaline, so avoid them. Most river sands sold at nurseries and hardware stores are awful horticultural products, so avoid them too.

You can mix crushed rock with your own soil, but I prefer to use it as a 300-450mm deep layer on top of the existing soil. On the top of that I usually scuff in a 75mm layer of bulk compost. Cover it all with leaf litter mulch to finish it off.

No-one can guarantee that you won't get some pest birds. No-one can guarantee that native birds will definitely come to your garden. But with a design like the one here you'll have every chance of fulfilling your dreams.

If you don't understand the pavilion thing in this garden design just go to the Burke's Backyard website at burkesbackyard.com.au and look up the Backyard Blitz fact sheets and search for the 'Ultimate Outdoor Entertainer'. It has all the details.

Oh, and an after-thought. I mentioned earlier that it is very naughty to feed kookaburras, magpies, currawongs and butcher birds, but it is fine to feed rainbow lorikeets with a lorikeet mix, and finches, parrots and pigeons with seed. Some groups like Wires claim that feeding wild native birds is harmful to them. However, research in Australia and around the world clearly proves that feeding wild birds is very beneficial for them. Feeding wild birds helps them to survive as they slowly begin to adapt to suburbia. Remember that we have removed most of their food plants and insects from the suburbs of Australia, so they are often doing it tough.

Toxic Sprays

Wherever possible, avoid using toxic sprays in the garden. Avoid lawn beetle sprays, particularly ones containing Confidor (Imidacloprid). Insecticides and fungicides are a problem in particular, however, the following natural sprays are quite safe: for root rot use Yates Anti Rot, for general fungal problems use Eco Fungicide, for insects use Eco Oil, Neem oil or Yates Natrasoap. If you wish to use Glyphosate, use Roundup Advance formulation as it is safer with frogs & fish (it is the wetting agent in Glyphosate that affects fish & frogs, and Roundup Advance is free of the wetting agent).

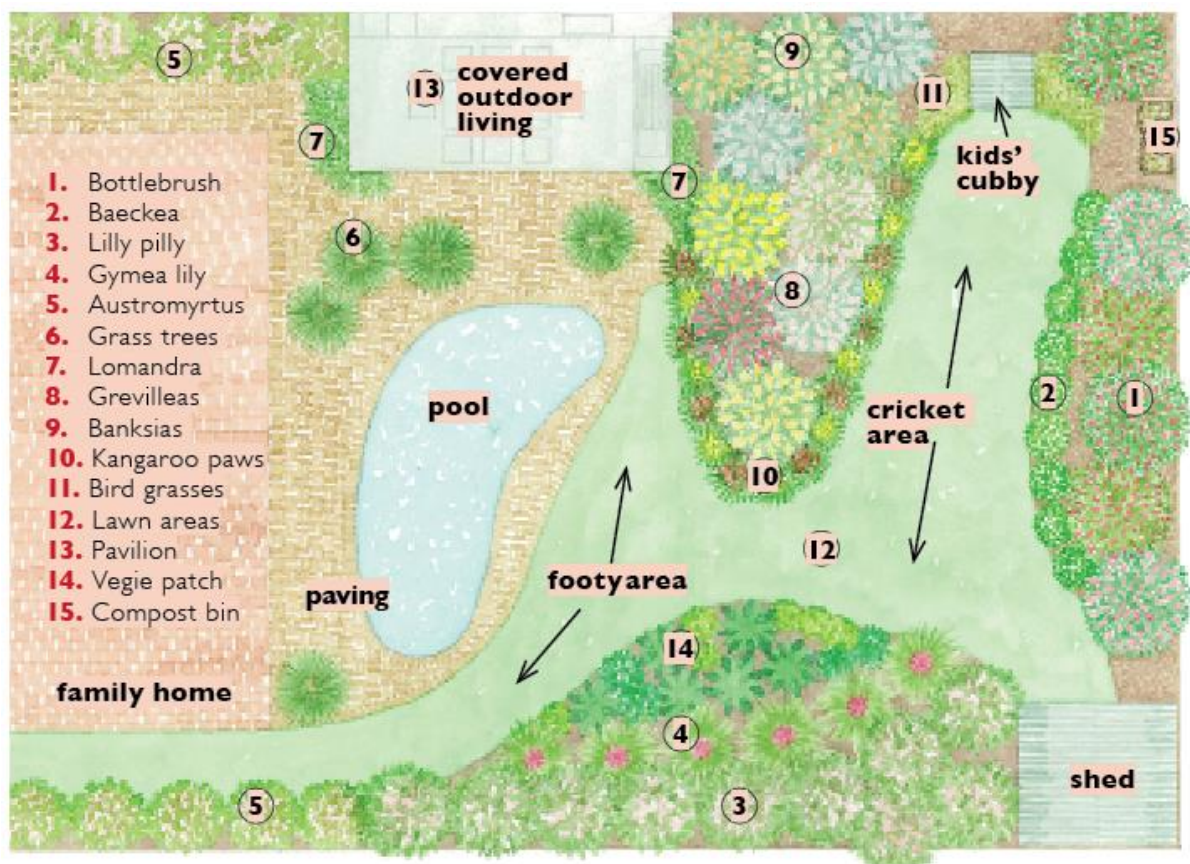
My Garden

Our present garden (featured in my book, 'Indigenous') was a barren, open area when we bought it, populated by many bird pests. Today they all avoid our place. We have around 200 species of native birds visiting instead. We reduced our areas of lawn – taking care to replace large open lawn areas with longer narrower areas (see design).

Some people will advise you to plant dense, prickly plants with short flowering periods. As if! As if people want ugly, prickly backyards with nowhere for the kids to play or for the adults to party.

One person recently said that Grevillea 'Robyn Gordon' attracts noisy miners and thus leads to a loss of biodiversity. This sort of silliness represents a real threat to our future. For the record, I have created and lived in two gardens designed to attract native birds for the last 35 years. The first was in Chatswood in Sydney. 'Robyn Gordon' was a major part of my plantings and we never saw noisy miners. What we did see was an increase of no less than five species of native birds every year: white-cheeked honeyeaters, New Holland honeyeaters, silvereyes, blue wrens and eastern spinebills came in the first year after planting. 'Robyn Gordon' was the key plant in the garden. Why? Because it produced flowers (and thus nectar) all year round, including winter. Without it, our birds would have had to fly away each winter – and that probably means starve to death as there is probably no place to fly to.

In our second garden 'Robyn Gordon' also features prominently. Over 200 species of native birds attend but no noisy miners (even though they are in nearby gardens). We have no resident feral species, but very occasionally get a visit from turtledoves who accompany the bronzewing pigeons, white-headed pigeons, brown pigeons, wonga pigeons, crested pigeons, diamond doves, bar-shouldered doves and peaceful doves. Not a bad list of companions.



Beautiful bird-friendly garden

1. Bottlebrush
We've included a mixture of bottlebrush here, such as Callistemon 'Harkness', C. 'Captain Cook' and C. 'Hannah Ray'. These are all excellent long-flowering shrubs whose nectar-filled flowers attract many different native birds.
2. Baeckea
Baeckea virgata 'Miniature' is a small (1-2m tall), dense, rounded shrub which produces small white flowers. This is an excellent nesting plant for small birds. Its very dense foliage provides very good security for small native birds, and the plants have lots of forks for the birds to build their nests on. You don't need birdhouses, just nest-friendly plants.
3. Lilly Pilly
Syzygium francissii 'Hobbit', like the baeckea, is a great nesting plant for birds. A small shrub to about 2.5m tall and wide, it's dense from the ground up and is a top class screen plant for all but our frostiest zones.
4. Gynea Lily
Doryanthes excelsa is pure garden drama for any garden designer, with its 1m clump of strap-like leaves and that tall flower spike (which can reach between 2-6m high) topped with a huge, nectar-filled flower head. A wide variety of nectar-eating birds

will flock to visit this plant when it's in flower in spring and summer. It does well in most parts of Australia, except frosty areas. It's worth a try in the tropics.

5. *Austromyrtus*

Austromyrtus inophloia is a lilly pillie relative that likes part shade (we used it down the sides). Its burgundy coloured new foliage is very pretty. Afterwards the foliage fades to green tinged with copper. Do, however, check with your local nursery to see if these plants are damaged by Myrtle Rust in your area. If they are, put in more *Banksias*, or lilly pillies in part shade.

6. Grass Trees

Several potted grass trees (*Xanthorrhoea*) are on the paved area around the pool. These slow-growing plants need excellent drainage, and are very well suited to pots.

7. *Lomandra*

Lomandra longifolia 'Tanika' is an outstanding, low-growing (60-70cm tall and wide) native grass with lime-green leaves and cream flowers. It grows in either full sun or light shade anywhere in Australia. We have had wrens nesting in our 'Tanikas'.

8. *Grevilleas*

We've chosen tropical *Grevilleas* here, such as *Grevillea* 'Robyn Gordon', G 'Honey Gem', G 'Golden Lyre', G 'Flamingo', and G 'Pink Surprise'. Long-flowering and filled with nectar, all will attract many birds. Other varieties may suit cold areas better.

9. *Banksias*

A mixture of *Banksias* such as *Banksia spinulosa*, *B. serrata* and *B. 'Hinchinbrook'* (with unusual steel-grey blooms) are important inclusions, as these provide food in autumn and winter when food is scarce.

10. Kangaroo Paws

Fabulous native perennials in a range of colours. They thrive in Perth and Adelaide, but on the humid East Coast choose the hardy 'Bush Gems' series.

11. Bird Grasses

An important food for seed-eating birds: guinea grass and panic veldt grass.

12. Lawn Areas

There's plenty of lawn here, but it's not wide, to discourage birds such as noisy miners, Indian miners, feral pigeons, turtle doves, blackbirds, starlings and sparrows (all of which love wide lawn areas) taking over and driving desirable native birds away.

13. Pavilion

Build a covered pavilion complete with barbecue, table, chairs and a fridge, put it by the paved area and the pool, and enjoy watching the native birds at play.

14. Vegie Patch

15. Compost Bin