

Wildlife Inventory

Overview: Work with your young gardeners to answer the question – “Who lives in our garden?”

Materials:

- Garden journal and pencils
- Digital camera (optional)
- Identification guides or Internet access

Approximate Time to Complete: 1+ hours

Location: Outdoor

Ages: All ages

Season: All seasons



Instructions

The garden is a wonderful ecosystem for kids to study. Organisms of all shapes and sizes reside happily in typical garden settings. The most obvious residents are your plants, but gardens are home to many other living creatures, including fungi, worms, and small animals (insects, mollusks, birds, snakes, and much more). One way to help kids take notice of the garden’s residents is to conduct a wildlife inventory. This can be a great introduction to the complex web of relationships found in a garden.

1. Set aside some chore-free time to **explore your garden**. For maximum enjoyment, select a day with comfortable weather and a relaxed schedule. You can also try visiting the garden at different times of the day to see if time, temperature and sunlight impact your garden visitors.
2. Before heading outside, **set the stage with a few ground rules and tips:**
 - Respect all life in the garden. Observe living creatures with your eyes, not your hands.
 - Write down or draw as many details as possible.
 - Remember to look in the soil and under leaves and rocks.

Depending on the interest of your young gardeners, you can conduct this activity from various angles. For example:

- If you have very young children, create a pictorial checklist of plants and animals they are likely to find in your garden, such as spiders, worms, butterflies, plants, squirrels, birds, and pill bugs. Ask the children to place a check mark or sticker on each picture when they spot that creature or plant. Leave some empty space for them to draw in unexpected discoveries.
- For older children who may still need a little guidance, develop a simple written checklist of organisms (with or

KidsGardening is a nonprofit educational organization. Support provided by sponsors and donors is critical to our ability to provide free garden-based resources for parents and educators. All gifts are tax-deductible.

without pictures) or make it more specific. For example, you may write "birds" for younger kids but list specific birds, such as "robin," "blue jay" or "sparrow," for older observers. Your local [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) office may have a list for your area (check out this [sample checklist](#) from New Hampshire Cooperative Extension).

- For more independent children, ask them to draw pictures in a journal or take digital photos of wildlife they discover. You can bring ID guides (either printed or digital) out with you to the garden or just plan to look them up when you return inside. There are many cool online resources to help with identification such as The Cornell Lab of Ornithology's bird identification [Merlin Bird ID App](#).
- For those reluctant explorers, turn your inventory into a game. See who can find the most wildlife. See who can find the smallest, or largest or most colorful. Give extra bonus points for finding camouflaged creatures.

3. To conclude the activity, **make a list of the organisms that live in your garden** and talk about how they all work and live together. Some questions you might want to ask include:

What did you find in the garden that you expected to see? What surprised you? How many different types of organisms did we find? How might garden plants attract the creatures you saw nearby? How might the plants benefit from the creatures? How might certain creatures benefit from certain plants? What could we do to increase the number of creatures living in our garden?

4. Want to attract more wildlife? Follow up your inventory by **researching ways you could work to attract targeted wildlife** such as birds or butterflies to your garden. What kind of plants and features could you add to help meet their basic needs of water, food and shelter?

5. Want to go a step further? **Participate in an organized wildlife inventory** and show your kids how your observations can help support conservation efforts. Here are a few opportunities you may want to explore:

- October Big Day (Bird count): <https://ebird.org/octoberbigday>
- The Great Backyard Bird Count (February): <http://gbbc.birdcount.org/>
- Monarch Watch: <https://www.monarchwatch.org/>
- The Lost Ladybug Project: <http://www.lostladybug.org/>
- Journey North (monitors a variety of migratory animals): <https://journeynorth.org/>

KidsGardening is a nonprofit educational organization. Support provided by sponsors and donors is critical to our ability to provide free garden-based resources for parents and educators. All gifts are tax-deductible.