

Creating space for beneficial species

Text Andrea Schmits

Sustainable gardening is the name of the game at the numerous green spaces on ETH's Zentrum and Hönggerberg campuses.

Gardeners at Händeliweg 19, near ETH Zurich's main building, are serenaded with the sound of buzzing – a philosophy of getting back to nature prevails here, and that means a wildlife-friendly environment. This is Christian Bäni's territory. Gardener for the Facility Management Infrastructure Division, he is also responsible for ETH's Zentrum campus. "I look after the green spaces around the ETH buildings, and am there to give the researchers any information they need," he says. Those seeking out Bäni's advice include employees of the Institute of Agricultural Sciences, who grow vegetables in the Händeliweg greenhouse to use in studies.

"ETH does a great deal for nature conservation," says Fritz Graber, who is responsible for the green spaces on the Hönggerberg campus. Grass, for instance, is mown in a way that leaves areas for insects to retreat into, while flower heads are left uncut until spring, giving birds and insects a source of food and a nesting place in winter.

Going wild for wild bees

The latest project involves two large areas intended to provide a haven for wild bees on the Zentrum and Hönggerberg campuses. From autumn, visitors will be able to tread stone paths through wild bee gardens planted with domestic wild shrubs, where they can discover the bees and their various nest types, like those made from dead wood, dried plant stems and empty snail shells – reflecting the diverse nest structures and flower preferences of Switzerland's approximately 600 wild bee varieties.



(Photo: Yannick Schauwecker)

It is hoped that providing this sustainable support will encourage local biodiversity and inspire visitors to make their own gardens and window boxes wild bee-friendly. One benefit of the insects is that they have the potential to boost crop yields significantly through intensive plant pollination. They only sting if they're highly stressed, and even if you are unlucky, "their sting is so small that you'd barely feel it," says Bäni.

The ETH site is also home to slow worms, something Bäni calls "a mark of a great garden" as the reptile needs a great deal of space, heat and light, as well

as enough snails and insects to provide food. Additionally, the green spaces have tried to eliminate traps for amphibians; for example, by providing ways for them to climb out of holes.

More vegetables – less rubbish

Bäni has a trick to prevent people littering around his garden beds: "I always plant something edible. People hardly ever litter vegetable patches, and some will even go out of their way to pick out any rubbish they see." ■