

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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As land usage and development by humans increase, wildlife is forced to learn to adapt to a changing environment. It has been suggested that reduction in natural habitat have negatively impacted many species of wildlife. One way a home gardener can help offset this possibility is by turning their plot of developed land into a wildlife habitat. Habitat is a wild animal's "support system". Requirements of animals are similar to ours: food, water, shelter, and space. A property that contains plants that produce edible seeds, fruits, nuts and flowering plants for nectar and pollen can help a variety of species. This gives the gardener an opportunity to enjoy observing these creatures. It is best to avoid shrubs or trees that offer little or poor quality food. Forsythia, red bud, and lilacs offer cover but no food. Try to plant "combinations" throughout the yard; if you like the spring color of lilacs, consider also adding Mountain ash, a native sumac and hawthorn. These trees are examples of winter food-bearing plants. Evergreens are a good choice as they provide cold weather shelter. Water is often a limiting factor in a backyard habitat. The eggs of young dragonflies, frogs and most salamanders need to be in water to develop. Water can take the form of birdbaths, ponds, irrigation ditches and natural landscape features. Add waterside plants to ponds to provide food for birds, and perching spots for dragonflies. Dragonflies are known for eating large numbers of mosquitoes and aphids.

Shelter also called cover is a place to raise young and hide from predators. Shelter provides a place to feed, play and rest safely. One way to provide quality shelter is to preserve existing trees and shrubs by letting them develop to their natural form. Other examples of shelter include rock piles, leaf litter left in place, and a section of grass un-mown. If you are tired of lawn maintenance some alternatives are using native ground covers rather than grass, rock gardens or meadow patches. A hummingbird or butterfly garden is made very attractive by using such plants as Aster, and Joe-Pye weed. The most successful way to attract hummingbirds to your garden is to provide a variety of sweet nectar flowers that are tubular in shape such as bleeding heart, and cardinal flower. Always keep in mind when choosing plants to select plants varieties that provide food during different seasons. When "dead heading" plants make sure to not deadhead all plants that produce seeds for birds and other wildlife such as Cosmos, goldenrod and sunflowers.

Different wildlife species will fill their life needs in different areas of your property. Structural diversity can be provided in any landscape by adding a mixture of different types of plants. By increasing the variety of plant species in your habitat, you will encourage wildlife to successfully co-exist.

Consider layering your landscape with "levels of plantings". Examples of an "upper and mid canopy level" would be to use trees such as Douglas fir or Douglas maple. For the "shrub level", examples would be Oregon grape, red flowering currant and evergreen huckleberry. The "ground level" plants could include Kinnikinnik, wild strawberry and Cotoneaster. Native plants require minimum maintenance once established. Identifying the existing plants on your property and getting know something about them can tell you what your soil is like in that area. When you are designing a naturalistic landscape, often those clues can give you a starting point. If you want to have, a plant identified, snip off six inches or so and take it into a WSU Master Gardener Plant clinic or the COOP Extension office. A fun way to become familiar with the wild plants growing on your property is by going on a guided native walk offered by a local conservation group. Collecting native plants from their natural settings is strongly discouraged because the practice has brought some plants to the brink of extinction. Most reputable nurseries grow their native plants from cuttings.

Start small, and you will reduce expense and enjoy your effects more. In addition, think in terms of years when it comes to attaining a landscape that meets the needs of wildlife.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

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