

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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Contact: WSU/Skagit County Extension: 428-4270

When planning a backyard to attract wildlife, consider offering three distinctly different areas where wildlife can seek refuge and feed. By combining tall trees, medium-sized shrubs, and low-growing groundcovers, you will extend the variety of habitats your backyard offers.

Trees can be a challenge in the home garden, but there are some small natives that will not overwhelm your yard. If you want five easy-care trees to start with, choose between shore pines, mountain hemlocks, vine maples, serviceberries, and ninebarks.

For your evergreen choice, if you have a sunny location, consider a shore pine (*Pinus contorta* var. *contorta*). It will grow fairly quickly to about 20 feet tall and 10 feet wide in either wet or dry conditions. It has pairs of short, dark needles, which give the tree an open, airy character. Pinecones release seeds for a wide range of birds and small mammals. Birds seek out insects in the branches and often nest there. If there are cavities in the trunk, sooner or later someone will move in. Pine white butterfly larvae feed on the needles.

If your yard is on the cool and moist side, mountain hemlock (*Tsuga mertensiana*) would be a better choice. It is a compact tree with an irregular branching pattern. In backyard conditions, it will grow slowly to 25 feet. The shiny dark green leaves of lower-growing salal (*Gaultheria shallon*) or evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*) contrast well with the soft gray-green of the hemlock needles. Seeds from the narrow, cylindrical cones provide food for birds and small mammals, and the dense branches provide nest sites for small birds and winter cover for many backyard visitors.

If you're looking for a small deciduous tree that will not only attract wildlife but also be a handsome addition to your yard, consider vine maples, serviceberries, or ninebarks. All grow well in just about any conditions and can be either tall shrubs or small trees.

Vine maples (*Acer circinatum*) are reminiscent of Japanese maples and pair well with red-flowering currants (*Ribes sanguineum*). They top out at between 15 and 30 feet tall and wide. In sun, they typically grow as upright small trees; in shade, they spread into multi-stemmed shrubs. Their striking tiny white flowers cupped in red sepals provide nectar for bees, and brown tissue moths and polyphemus moths enjoy their leaves. Birds eat the distinctive winged seeds in the fall. At season's end, the leaves turn gold to burgundy, with deeper colors in sunnier sites.

Saskatoon or serviceberries (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) reach 8 to 30 feet tall and wide. In nature, they grow on dry, sunny banks, but they will grow in moist conditions provided there is good drainage. The leaves attract swallowtail and other butterfly larvae. The spring flowers provide nectar for spring azure butterflies before giving way to dusty red berries that ripen to purple black in late summer. Try picking some of the berries for your own use before the birds get them all. Although they are not often eaten in the Pacific Northwest, east of the Rockies, the berries are much prized for pies.

Ninebarks (*Physocarpus capitatus*) are multi-stemmed shrubs or small trees that grow to 10 to 15 ft tall and wide. They are often found along water, but they also grow in dry, bushy areas. As they mature, they develop brown, shredding bark. Snowballs of creamy white flowers appear in spring, followed by reddish bunches of seedpods that provide food for birds and small mammals.

Consider adding any of the small trees listed here to add visual appeal to your landscape while encouraging 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.