

Wildlife Habitat Garden

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Balancing the needs of humans and nature

Have you ever thought about converting a neglected, weed-tangled corner of your backyard into a mini wildlife sanctuary? Or such habitat may be on a farm, around the place you work, or in a neighborhood park. Many existing landscapes can also be enhanced to fill them with the music of croaking frogs and chirping birds.

It can be more easily done than you might think by working with nature, instead of fighting against her wishes.

The benefits of gardening for wildlife habitat are manifold. Not only does it contribute to the survival of the wildlife, it also offers connections to the community as well as educational opportunities. Most of all, it is healthy and fun.

First, we should consider which wildlife we wish to invite as regular visitors and inhabitants. It helps to differentiate those from unwelcome, nuisance or dangerous species and find ways to avoid and mitigate the conflicts. By managing the elements in the habitat, we often can influence the makeup of its inhabitants.

Beneficial wildlife may include four categories:

- small mammals, such as bats, chipmunks and squirrels
- birds, such as bluebirds, hummingbirds, pigeons, owls, robins, swallows, goldfinch, wrens, chickadees and woodpeckers
- reptiles and amphibians, such as frogs, toads, turtles, salamanders, lizards and garter snakes
- insects, such as bees, butterflies, dragonflies, damselflies, ladybugs, beetles and hoverflies

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife offers monthly "Crossing Paths News Notes" through its "Living with Wildlife" website (http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/crossing_paths/). You can subscribe to and automatically receive new information regularly.

The National Wildlife Federation also operates a "Garden for Wildlife" program. You can learn and work with its local affiliates (such as Friday Creek Habitat Stewards and Camano Island Wildlife Habitat Project) to build and certify your wildlife habitat and even earn a yard sign to show your commitment and accomplishments.

Components of a viable wildlife habitat include food sources, water sources, shelter, places to raise young and application of sustainable gardening practices to keep the habitat in good condition.



Although it doesn't have to be this elaborate, adding a place for insects to nest is a great way to turn your garden into something more than a pretty bed of flowers. *Photo by Nancy Crowell/WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

For food sources, a good mix of seed/fruit-producing plants at different times of the year is essential. Consider insects as an important part of the diet for many birds. Avoid using insecticides to kill off “bad bugs,” because they kill beneficial bugs as well. Furthermore, “bad” bugs are part of the important food chain. Instead, deal with pests using the best practices of Integrated Pest Management, such as monitoring and defining acceptable pest thresholds. An organic approach would be most preferred.

Most birds and mammals need to consume water daily to survive. Many animals will walk, fly or crawl a long distance just to reach a water source, but water is usually a major limiting factor in a backyard wildlife habitat. Therefore, water features such as a pond, a fountain, or a birdbath would be very beneficial. On the other hand, high water-content fleshy fruits, plant leaves and morning dews can also supplement.

Shelter provides cover for the wildlife to rest safely, hide from predators and protect against the weather elements. Nest boxes of the right sizes for the right species of birds can be used. It is beneficial if the shelter is near the feeding place. Preserving and using existing materials to create the cover would be the most suitable and advantageous. Good examples are: dense branches on the trees and in the hedgerow (mixed hedge) and brush piles and rock shelves on the ground.



Left: A birdbath is a simple way to offer a stopping point for wildlife. Adding a rock to it makes it possible for butterflies to partake as well. (*Photo by Nancy Crowell/WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*) **Right:** A makeshift toad house, with a mud pool, in a shade garden. (*Photo by Everett Chu/WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*)

Wildlife also need a protected space to raise their offspring, including suitable plantings for insects to lay their eggs. Amphibians require a very different habitat in their juvenile stage compared to their adult phase. Therefore, habitat provided in all phases of their lifecycle is crucial to their survival.

Abundance and biodiversity are key to a robust wildlife ecosystem. It begins with the soil. Preserving and bringing the soil to rich and loamy fertility will accelerate and invigorate all that succeeds it, making the landscape self-renewing, letting nature do most of the work.

For biodiversity, the plant community should be varied and full, appropriate for its local microclimate. It would be wise to preserve what native plants you already have and use native species wherever you can. Regardless of the hydrology you have on-site (wet or dry and where the water comes and goes), the native plants are already adapted to it. And chances are the wildlife can recognize them and appreciate them more than introduced exotic plants or fancy cultivars.

Many non-native plants do boost the supplies of nectar, pollen and fruit. They can draw in wildlife for closer viewing. Avoid using invasive types that could escape into the natural areas, competing with and displacing native species.

Among the most productive ecosystems, teeming with more diverse plants and wildlife than any other land piece are wetlands. They are an invaluable component of a wildlife habitat and worth protecting.

A dynamic ecosystem is constantly evolving. It will change over time as one type of plant cover is naturally replaced by another. As the habitat becomes more varied, more niches for wildlife would appear. Often, an initial restoration of a habitat triggers a cascade of niches, leading to an ever-evolving and increasingly-successful habitat, until a form of stability takes hold.



Left: This Crocosmia ‘Lucifer’ attracts hummingbirds on its own, but there is also a feeder nestled in among the blooms. *Photo by Nancy Crowell/WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Depending on the stages of succession, the ecosystem may favor certain types of wildlife over others. To encourage or maintain the presence of preferred wildlife species, you can maintain a particular stage of succession, by intervening to provide the best habitat for that species.

Still, a wildlife garden may not necessarily be a story of “I build it and they will come.” The presence and population of the desirable wildlife may be limited by its “carrying capacity” and is a factor of “island biogeography.” This will be especially true if you live in an urban community far removed from the forest edge, park and greenbelt. A community approach to connect islands of wildlife habitat would be definitely helpful in such cases.

RESOURCES:

- ***Pacific Northwest Wildlife Management Basics for Pesticide Applicator Licensing.*** Washington State University Extension, Publication EM008. 2011.
- ***Wildlife of the Pacific Northwest: Tracking and Identifying Mammals, Birds, Reptiles, Amphibians, and Invertebrates.*** David Moskowitz. Timber Press Field Guide, 2010.
- ***Living with Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest.*** Russell Link. University of Washington Press and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. 2004.
- ***Landscaping for Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest.*** Russell Link. University of Washington Press and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, 1999.
- ***Gaia’s Garden: A Guide to Home-scale Permaculture.*** Toby Hemenway. Chelsea Green Publishing. 2000.
- ***Living with Wildlife.*** Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife. Website link <http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/>
- ***Garden for Wildlife Program.*** National Wildlife Federation. Website link <http://www.nwf.org/Garden-For-Wildlife.aspx>