

ASK THE MASTER GARDENER

Every year many acres of land convert themselves (with our help) from wildland and agriculture to urban/suburban development in Skagit County. As yet, however, in our county, we are lucky to still have the richness of birds and other wildlife to gladden our hearts and draw tourists from all over the world. How can we maintain our wildlife diversity, however, in the face of increasing urbanization/suburbanization of our land?

Five types of upland (non-coastal, non-wetland) landscapes are favored habitat for wildlife, and, in fact, provide nature's homes, security guard systems, and bird and wildlife feeders. Unfortunately these are the very landscapes most homeowners and gardeners want to be rid of.

- **Dead trees and downed wood:** Homeowners dread live trees, let alone snags, falling on their own or neighbors' houses, across paths, driveways or roads, on cars, or on pets or at worst, people. However, if you have a snag in your yard far enough away from any liability, consider leaving it for the benefit of birds and small mammals. Woodpeckers mine snags for insects and hollow out their nests in snags. These handy cubbies also draw owls, chickadees, wrens, squirrels and bats to use for nests and hiding places. A dead tree in a hazardous place may be made safer by topping to tolerable height. Downed, decayed wood is extremely valuable in drought conditions. Long after all ground and forest duff have turned to dust, downed decayed logs remain wet like sponges.
- **Brushy forest understory thicket:** Winter wrens and varied thrushes need brush to hide their nests from crows, jays, and other nest predators. Brush also bears berries, like huckleberry, salmonberry, thimbleberry: edible fruit ripening at just the right time to feed growing chicks. Shaggy, oversized oceanspray for instance, with tumbling cascades of delicate white flowers in spring that turn into unsightly brown seed clumps in late summer, is food for Lorquin's Admiral butterfly while blooming, and for varied thrush when the brown seeds ripen. Insect galls in thimbleberry and blackberry, while ugly, unsightly knobs, are winter food for chickadees and woodpeckers.
- **Blackberry thicket:** Of all thickets Himalayan blackberries are one of the worst. These thugs don't know their place, but thrust concertina-wire like tentacles across the garden in all directions, staking claim to your favorite beds, your house and anything else in their way. However, blackberries do supply abundant food for birds, insects and mammals and also make great pies and jams for people. Hummingbirds often choose blackberry thickets as nesting sites, finding the wicked thorns effective guards for their tiny vulnerable chicks. Blackberry flowers are also an invaluable source of nectar for local bees.
- **Willow thicket:** Homeowners are wary of willows for good reason. Willow roots will go any distance to find water, which underground household or irrigation plumbing conveniently provides. However, according to National Audubon Society's *The Sibley Guide for Birds*, warblers, like yellow and Wilson's, prefer willow thickets to any other plantings for food and breeding.
- **Unkempt grass:** Let's face it, dry grass is a fire hazard. However, if you have a grassy field, well away from any house, let at least some of it grow tall and produce seed. Tall grass serves as favored nesting places for Savannah sparrow; while dried

grass seed serves as winter forage not only for song sparrow, chickadees, and finches, but for mice and voles also. “Who cares about mice and voles?” you might ask. Hawks and owls do!

If you value wildlife and have room for something wild on your property or in your garden, try to set aside space for it. When a whole neighborhood can cooperate to share a larger, more contiguous wild area, so much the better. If you already have to contend with one or more of these unruly “problem areas” on your land, you now have a perfect excuse to shirk the unpleasant duty of converting these “eyesores” to neat lawn or flowerbeds. Plus you just might be richly rewarded for your laziness with some delightful wildlife sightings from your porch or kitchen window.

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