

Creating an Urban Backyard Wildlife Habitat



No garden is complete without wildlife and creating a wildlife habitat in your backyard is easy. Birds, butterflies and other wildlife will flock to your backyard when you provide what they need to exist and thrive: food, water, and shelter—the definition of **habitat**.

Gardening to attract wildlife will not only provide beauty and entertainment, birds and butterflies are also very beneficial. Perhaps the most helpful practice of birds is that of eating insects. Many birds help keep aphids, mites, beetles and grubs under control. While feeding on nectar in flowers, both birds and butterflies help with pollination, which is necessary for continued seed production in plants and is a vital part of nature.

However, we cannot be selective as to the type of wildlife we attract. What some may consider “undesirables,” such as rabbits and squirrels, will be just as attracted to your garden as birds and butterflies. We have to accept all wildlife to our gardens and learn to live with and tolerate all creatures of nature.



The Two Rules for Attracting Wildlife

Rule #1. No pesticides!

Pesticides kill caterpillars and many beneficial insects. The best defense is to grow strong plants.

- *Plant the right plant in the right place.*
- Choose disease-resistant varieties.
- Give plants the proper sun exposure.

- Prepare the soil properly.
- Provide adequate fertilization and irrigation.
- Carefully select fertilizer, compost and other soil amendments. Some compost made from grass clippings, both commercially prepared and from clippings in your backyard, may contain pesticides and herbicides. Viruses may also exist in compost if diseased leaves and plants were used in the process.

Rule #2. Provide variety and density.

A greater variety of plants will attract a greater variety of animals. Trees, shrubs, vines, ground covers, and an assortment of annuals and perennials are all important in attracting wildlife. In a small yard, you may be limited to single plantings of several varieties of plants. In larger areas, you can have mass plantings or groupings of the same species.

The density of the plantings is just as important as the variety. Dense cover from evergreens in the winter is essential in order to provide refuge from winter winds. In Kansas, cedars are a great addition to the wildlife garden. Many bird species nest or hide in them and their blue berries provide winter nourishment.

Establishing a Wildlife-Friendly Garden

You don't have to live with a wild, unkempt look to attract wildlife—most plant and tree species favored by them are very attractive and commonly used in the landscape.

► *Trees*

Trees are the foundation of any garden. Besides providing shade and beauty, they supply fruit, seeds, sap, shelter, and nesting sites for birds.

Flowering and fruit-bearing trees provide nectar in the spring, nesting sites in the summer, fruit in the autumn and shelter year-round. Some evergreens produce berries that birds love as well as providing nesting and shelter sites.

Trees are also essential for butterflies. They offer protection from the sun and wind, and serve as host plants for the eggs and caterpillars of many butterfly species.

In a natural setting, large trees work in unison with smaller understory trees. This layered look is easy to replicate, as there are many species of trees that grow well in the light shade provided by taller trees.

► *Shrubs*

Shrubs, like trees, are the backbone of every wildlife garden. They offer food, shelter, and nesting sites for birds and can also serve as a nectar and larval food source for certain butterfly species. To attract the largest variety of birds, plant an assortment of shrubs that bear fruit at different times during the late summer and fall, as well as a combination of low, medium, and tall-growing shrubs.

► *Vines*

Vines lure butterflies, birds—especially hummingbirds—and bees with their nectar-rich flowers. Combine both annual and perennial vines in your landscape. Birds love the seeds of annual vines even after the foliage has withered in the winter.

► *Ground covers*

Ground covers provide a haven for smaller wildlife such as beetles, spiders, ladybugs, toads and frogs. Many birds are attracted to the food sources that live among the leaves of ground covers.

Ground covers also make an excellent transition from lawn to garden. They are a great choice

for erosion control and for planting in areas where grass does not grow well.

There are ground covers that do well in full sun as well as varieties that do well in full shade. Perennial ground covers may take time to establish and cover an area; annual ground covers may be used to fill in the spaces temporarily.

► *Flowers*

Flowers add color, fragrance and beauty to every garden. Perennials are available in a wide variety of species in all heights and blooming times. Annuals bloom continuously during the season. By planting a mix of perennial and annual flowers, you can have continuous color as well as a spring-to-fall attraction for birds, bees and butterflies in your garden.

Plant perennials and annuals in masses so that colors stand out and are easily seen by birds and butterflies. In the fall, leave the seedpods on your flowers, as these provide a feast for many birds.

Hummingbirds and butterflies are attracted to flowers by color and scent, preferring bright colors like red, orange and yellow. Butterflies need both nectar-rich flowers for the adults to feed on as well as larval plants for caterpillars. The best way to attract a particular butterfly species is to provide the plants that the adults lay eggs on and the caterpillars eat. It is important to remember that you will be sharing these plants with the caterpillars as they munch on the vegetation. The look may not always be perfect, but that is the price we pay for attracting these beautiful creatures to our garden.



► *Native plants*

Native plants should always be considered when planning a backyard wildlife habitat. Native plants provide the best overall food sources for wildlife and at the same time require less fertilizer, water and pest control. They are easy to grow because they are accustomed to our climate and soil conditions.

► *Water*

Water is one of the most important features in your wildlife garden. Wildlife need water every day! Birds are attracted to water for drinking and bathing. Butterflies are attracted to puddles and damp areas. A water garden or small pond will supply water for drinking and bathing, as well as a habitat for salamanders and frogs.

Water features do not have to be elaborate. A simple birdbath or two is all that is necessary.

A birdbath should be shallow, no deeper than 2 to 3 inches with a gradual slope. Elevated birdbaths are safer for birds—they can easily escape predators. When placed on the ground near shrubs or other cover, a birdbath will provide water for small animals. Combining elevated and ground birdbaths is a good idea. Remember to always keep the water clean, and be sure to provide adequate water year-round, especially in the winter when natural water sources freeze.

Plant List

The following plant list is by no means all inclusive, but providing an assortment of these plants will be a good start in attracting a variety of wildlife to your garden.

Trees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apple • Beech • Cherry • Dogwood • Flowering crab • Hackberry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hawthorn • Hickory • Juniper • Maple • Mulberry • Oak 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pawpaw • Peach • Pear • Plum • Redbud • Tulip Tree
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Shrubs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Butterfly bush • Chokeberry • Cotoneaster • Holly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hydrangea • Lilac • Pyracantha • Redtwig dogwood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serviceberry • Shrub/rugosa rose • Viburnum • Weigelia
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Vines	<p><u>Perennial</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boston ivy • Clematis • Climbing hydrangea • Climbing rose • Dutchman's pipe • Grape vine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honeysuckle vine • Porcelain vine • Trumpet vine • Virginia creeper • Wisteria 	<p><u>Annual</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black-Eyed Susan vine • Cardinal climber • Moon flower • Morning glory • Scarlet runner bean
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Ground Covers	<p><u>Perennial</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ajuga • Alpine strawberry • Honeysuckle • Ivy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-growing herbs such as thyme and sweet woodruff • Pachysandra • Vinca 	<p><u>Annual</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creeping petunia • Creeping Phlox • Portulaca • Sweet alyssum • Verbena
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(cont.)

Flowers

Perennial

- Aster
- Bee balm
- Butterfly weed
- Columbine
- Coral Bell
- Coreopsis
- Delphinium
- Dianthus
- Goldenrod
- Poppy
- Purple coneflower
- Shasta

Annual

- Ageratum
- Alyssum
- Bachelor's button
- Cleome
- Cosmos
- Dill
- Fennel
- Geranium
- Globe amaranth
- Lantana
- Lobelia
- Marigolds
- Parsley
- Verbena
- Zinnia

In Conclusion . . .

Transforming your landscape into a wildlife retreat takes time. Be patient and, as the plants mature, nature will discover the habitat you have provided. Besides the benefits to wildlife, backyard wildlife landscaping recycles oxygen, reduces noise pollution, provides privacy, increases property values, and reduces heating and cooling costs for the home.

Website Recommendations

- National Wildlife Federation - www.nwf.org
- Missouri Department of Conservation's *Grow Native* Program - www.grownative.org,

Works Cited

- *Nature's Gardens – Create a Haven for Birds, Butterflies - and Yourself*, a publication by Better Homes and Gardens; 1995.
- *Gardening to Attract Birds and Butterflies*, a publication by NK Lawn and Garden Co., 1995.
- *Landscaping for Backyard Wildlife*, a publication by the Missouri Department of Conservation, 1991.



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