



Your garden can be much more than a space for vegetables and flowers it can also be a haven that supports wildlife. Experts agree a garden that supports wildlife is a vibrant, biodiverse, and healthy ecosystem.

When city sprawl creates habitat loss for wildlife, urban gardeners play a vital role in supporting a refuge for birds, bees, butterflies, and other wildlife. A garden that supports these species is not only beautiful, bountiful, and entertaining, but it also supports the overall health of the local environment

Birds, butterflies, and bees are beneficial to the gardener. Birds feast on aphids, mites, beetles and grubs, helping the gardener control pests without using chemicals. Butterflies, birds, and bees all feed on flower nectar and aid pollination which is essential for abundance and quality of garden produce and flowers. There are many species of flies that also aid in pollination.

Wildlife will visit your backyard when you provide the habitat they need to thrive: shelter, water, and species they favor as food. Here is how to do it using two simple rules:

Rule #1. Use no pesticides!



Pesticides kill caterpillars, songbirds, mammals, toads, frogs, pollinators, and many beneficial insects. A better defense is to grow strong, healthy plants in this manner:

- Plant the right plant in the right place.
- Choose disease-resistant varieties.

- Give plants the proper sun exposure.
- Provide adequate irrigation.
- Carefully select fertilizer, compost, and other soil amendments.
Note that: Purchased compost may contain pesticides, herbicides, and plant viruses.

Rule #2. Provide plant variety and density.

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

The density of plantings is just as important as variety. Dense cover from evergreens in winter is essential to provide wildlife refuge from winter winds. In Kansas, cedars are a great addition to the wildlife garden as many birds nest or hide in them.

Establishing a Wildlife-Friendly Garden

You do not have to live with a wild, unkempt look to attract wildlife to your garden. Most plant and tree species favored by wildlife 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 larval hosts for the 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 butterfly species. To attract the largest variety of birds, plant an assortment of shrubs that bear fruit at various times during late summer and fall. A combination of low, medium, and tall-growing shrubs is best.

► *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 cover*

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

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 spread and cover an area; annual ground covers will fill spaces temporarily.

► *Flowers*

Flowers add color, fragrance, and beauty to every garden. Perennials are available in a wide variety of species, heights, and bloom 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.

Plant perennials and annuals in masses so that colors stand out, and birds and butterflies can easily see them. In the fall, leave the seedpods on flowers, as these provide a feast for 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 host plants for caterpillars. The best way to attract a particular butterfly species is to provide the plants that the adults lay eggs on (larval host plants). These are the plants that 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 of the plant may not always be perfect, but that is the price paid for attracting these beautiful creatures to the garden.



► *Native plants*

You should always consider native plants when planning a wildlife habitat. Native plants provide the best overall food source for wildlife and at the same time require less fertilizer, water, and pest control. They are easy to grow because they are already acclimated to Kansas climate and soil conditions.

► *Water*

Water is one of the most important features in a 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 as 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 an excellent 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
--------------	--	--	---

Shrubs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buttonbush • Chokeberry • Cotoneaster • Holly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hydrangea • Lilac • Pyracantha • Red Twig Dogwood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serviceberry • Shrub/rugosa rose • Viburnum • Weigelia
---------------	--	--	---

Vines	<p><u>Perennial</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clematis • Climbing hydrangea • Climbing rose • Dutchman's pipe • Grape vine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honeysuckle vine (native or coral) • 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
--------------	--	--	---

Ground Covers	<p><u>Perennial</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alpine strawberry • Honeysuckle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-growing herbs such as thyme and sweet woodruff • Allegheny Spurge • Vinca 	<p><u>Annual</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creeping petunia • Creeping Phlox • Portulaca • Sweet alyssum • Verbena
----------------------	--	---	--

(cont.)

Flowers

Perennial

- Aster
- Bee balm
- Butterfly weed
- Columbine
- Coral Bell
- Coreopsis
- Delphinium
- Dianthus
- Goldenrod
- Poppy
- Purple coneflower
- Round-leaved ragwort
- Rudbeckia
- Shasta daisy

Annual

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

In Conclusion . Besides benefiting wildlife, habitat gardening recycles oxygen, increases garden abundance, reduces noise pollution, provides privacy, and reduces heating and cooling costs for the home. Transforming your landscape into a wildlife retreat takes time. Be patient and, as the plants and trees mature, nature will discover the habitat you have provided.

Revised
2026

K-STATE
Extension
Master Gardener
Johnson County

Extension Master Gardener Hotline
(913) 715-7050
garden.help@jocogov.org

Publications from Kansas State University are available at www.ksre.ksu.edu. Date shown is that of publication or last revision. Contents of this publication may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. All other rights reserved. In each case, credit the authors, Publication Title, Kansas State University, Month Year. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Director of Extension, Kansas State University, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts. Kansas State University is an equal opportunity provider and employer. This publication will be made available in an accessible alternative format or in languages other than English upon request. Please contact ksrebookstore@ksu.edu to request translation services.