

Creating A Backyard Wildlife Habitat

By Kate O'Lenic, Master Gardener

If you already have trees, shrubs and flowers that attract birds, butterflies, and bees, you have a great start for enhancing the attraction of wildlife to your garden. There are a lot of reasons to make your gardens wildlife friendly. If you love birdwatching, more birds are likely to visit if you give them the plants and insects they love. You can lure hummingbirds with the right plants, too.

To make it the best possible environment, the habitat needs to include a source of clean water, food, and shelter. It also needs to be pesticide-free for safety. Using native plants ensures the wildlife have the food sources they prefer and can reduce your garden maintenance efforts and costs. Native plants often require less fertilization, less water, and often provide pest control.

There are ways to avoid the use of pesticides by selecting disease-resistant plant varieties and providing proper exposure to the sun. Ensuring proper soil conditions and irrigation also will help. Enticing more birds to the garden with carefully selected plants can also be beneficial in that the birds will eat aphids, grubs, mites, and beetles. You and the birds will both be happy about that.

It is said that variety is the spice of life. Attract more wildlife with plants that include trees, shrubs, vines, groundcovers, annuals, and perennials. Providing dense coverage with evergreens provides nesting for birds and protection in the winter. Berry-producing evergreens are also a good food supply for birds in the winter. Flowering and fruit trees provide nectar in the spring, nesting sites in the summer, and food in the fall. Many butterflies also use certain trees as hosts for their caterpillars. Just as trees provide food, shelter and nesting sites, shrubs also provide these same benefits. Placing shrubs in the garden provides a natural layered look that enhances the beauty of any garden.

Vines and groundcovers can be helpful additions to any garden. Flowering vines, both annual and perennial, attract butterflies and hummingbirds. After flowering, birds will love eating the seeds, too. Groundcovers provide a nice place for insects, beetles, spiders, toads, frogs, and others to reside. Birds will be attracted to those tasty food sources.

Remember to provide a source of water. Birds and insects need water to prosper. A simple birdbath, a small pond or puddle area will do the trick. Using ground level and raised birdbaths provides water for both small animals and birds. Birdbaths need to be shallow and sloped for the best safety. Inexpensive electrical warmers are available to keep the water from freezing in the winter.

One other feature to consider is a brush and/or a rock pile. These can provide good places for resting, nesting, hiding, and feeding. Brush piles are created by placing the largest logs or branches on the bottom, then topping with smaller material. Place the piles near food sources. The piles can be small or large, natural or designed. For example, use a suitable piece of wood furniture as a basis for an attractive "pile". Let your imagination run wild.



Inviting more wildlife into your gardens has so many benefits. It gives wildlife a place to thrive when so much habitat is being lost elsewhere. It brings nature closer to you for your enjoyment and education, and it offers a beautiful garden for all to enjoy.

Resources

Backyard Wildlife Habitats

[https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/426/426-070/SPES-247%20\(2\).pdf](https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/426/426-070/SPES-247%20(2).pdf)

Management Practices for Enhancing Wildlife Habitat

<https://extension.psu.edu/management-practices-for-enhancing-wildlife-habitat>

Creating an Urban Backyard Wildlife Habitat

<https://www.johnson.k-state.edu/docs/lawn-and-garden/in-house-publications/gardening-wildlife/Creating%20an%20Urban%20Backyard%20Wildlife%20Habitat%20REV%202022.pdf>

The **next University of Tennessee Master Gardener class** at the Sullivan County Extension Office located at 140 Spurgeon Ln, Blountville, TN. starts on **January 30, 2024** and continues every Tuesday for 14 weeks.

10AM – 12noon

Call the Extension Office for information and application form.

423-574-1919

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, "ASK A MASTER GARDENER" to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.