

Gardening for Wildlife (published 2025-11-01)

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Do you enjoy the sound of birdsong in the morning? Do you delight in butterflies, hummingbirds, and bees visiting your garden? Would you love some natural help fighting off (and eating up) pests in the garden? If so, gardening for wildlife is a solution to increasing the number of birds, butterflies, and bees in your yard. Autumn is an ideal time to focus on gardening for wildlife, as the decisions you make now can provide food and shelter during the winter months, ultimately leading to an increase in birds and butterflies next spring.

Gardening for wildlife is as simple as providing the habitat that native wildlife uses. By providing the food, water, and shelter that birds, bees, and butterflies need, you can attract them to your yard and increase their local numbers. Tennessee has a certification program that is easy to use and will walk you through each step of the process. See “Create and Certify Your Own Wildlife Habitat” in Sources at the end of this article.

Afraid your small yard won’t make much of a difference? A study found that yards in both cities and suburbs that were certified as wildlife habitats “support a wider variety of bird species compared with more traditional yard landscaping (e.g., lawn-dominated yards). This suggests that landscape management for wildlife can contribute to region-wide bird diversity.”

Native plants form the foundation of any wildlife garden. Native plants are those indigenous to the area, plants that have co-evolved in a space for thousands of years. Many insects have evolved to survive only on specific native species. The most well-known of these relationships is the monarch butterfly caterpillar, which only eats milkweed. Your wildlife garden doesn’t need to be entirely native plants. Aim for 70% native plants to provide food and shelter. The seeds, berries, pollen and nectar, and leaves are all food sources for both the insects and birds. You can also provide supplemental food via a well-maintained bird feeder. Keeping it clean and well-stocked is vital to keeping the bird population healthy.

The next component in your wildlife garden is water. Birds need water to both drink and bathe in, and many insects and amphibians need water for raising their young. This may already exist on your property in the form of lakes, streams, or ponds. You can also add this with a bird bath or puddling pond, or a shallow dish with water.

Wildlife needs places to hide to rest and feel safe from predators, people, and weather. The same native plants that provide food can also provide this habitat element. The more densely you plant, the more cover is provided. The most important part of providing cover is the variety of plants - from evergreen trees to thorny branches to hollow stems - diversity in planting provides cover for a variety of wildlife.

Autumn is the time of year when you can make gardening decisions that will provide cover for the winter. Many butterfly and moth species overwinter as pupae in leaf litter. So, leaving fallen leaves furnishes cover and is a vital food source for birds in spring. Leaving your perennial flower stems 12-24 inches tall creates a habitat for solitary native bees. Snags, or dead trees that are left vertical, provide a home and food to birds, especially woodpeckers.

The final step to wildlife gardening is to use sustainable garden practices. Organic gardening methods include avoiding neonicotinoid pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Managing your water resources, reducing impermeable surfaces, and turning off outdoor lights at night are all helpful. Maintaining your landscape in an environmentally friendly way ensures that the soil, air, and water that you've invited native wildlife to visit will stay clean and healthy.

Sources:

“Residential yard management and landscape cover affect urban bird community diversity across the continental USA,” https://www.fs.usda.gov/nrs/pubs/jrnl/2021/nrs_2021_lerman_004.pdf

“What is a Native Plant?” <https://theconservationfoundation.org/native-plants-101-what-is-a-native-plant/>

“Landscaping for Wildlife”

https://www.fs.usda.gov/wildflowers/Native_Plant_Materials/Native_Gardening/landscapingforwildlife.shtml

“Create and Certify Your Own Wildlife Habitat,” <https://tnwf.org/certify-a-habitat/>

“Garden Cleanup for Pollinators”

<https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/garden-cleanup-for-pollinators-trim-perennial-stems-in-their-first-winter>

“How to garden organically for wildlife,” <https://wlgf.org/gardening-for-wildlife/garden-management/how-to-garden-organically-for-wildlife/>

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT's YouTube site for helpful videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IkIH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County's YouTube site: <https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

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.