

Gardening for Wildlife

by Jerry Schelhorn, Nursery Manager



I would like to convey a new take on this old topic about the many benefits of maintaining a property to which wildlife will be attracted and in which it will thrive. By keeping a hospitable environment for wildlife, you will in turn be nurturing yourself and your family in your outdoor rooms.

The types and amounts of wildlife you attract are totally under your control. Raccoons, skunks and deer will not be attracted to your property unless you leave out pet food or excessive amounts of bird seed. I take in my bird feeders to my garden shed each evening. If I forget, it's not a big deal because these animals are not now accustomed to there being food out. I live in a rural wooded area and do not have an issue with these animals.

I do however, reap the benefits of keeping an organic landscape full of friendly wildlife-attracting plants. My family and I enjoy the three great B's: Birds, Butterflies and Bees. We also enjoy toads, moths, praying mantis, dragonflies and squirrels, to name a few. You will find the plants which attract the friendly wildlife are also highly ornamental being very pleasing to look at and many with nice fragrances. **Here is a list of plants which are easy to care for and attract friendly wildlife:**

TREES

Sweet Bay Magnolia- Birds and bees
Dogwood- Birds
Serviceberry- Birds
Red Horsechestnut- Hummingbirds
Oaks- Squirrels
Crabapples- Birds and bees
Evergreen Trees- Birds

SHRUBS

Viburnums- Birds and bees
Witch Hazels- Bees
Rose-of-Sharon- Bees and hummingbirds
Butterfly Bush- Butterflies, hummingbirds and bees
Vitex- Butterflies, hummingbirds and bees
Summersweet- Butterflies, hummingbirds and bees
Virginia Sweetspire- Butterflies and bees
Caryopteris- Hummingbirds, butterflies and bees
Fothergilla- Bees

PERENNIALS

Catmint- Hummingbirds, butterflies and bees
Cardinal Flower- Hummingbirds and bees
Bee Balm- Hummingbirds and bees
Coneflowers- Butterflies and bees
Sedums- Butterflies and bees
Dianthus- Hummingbirds, butterflies and bees
Salvia- Hummingbirds, butterflies and bees
Hyssops- Hummingbirds, butterflies and bees
Lavender- Hummingbirds, butterflies and bees
Veronica- Butterflies and bees
Sundrops- Butterflies and bees
Baptisia- Bees
Garden Phlox- Hummingbirds, butterflies, bees
Butterfly Weed- Butterflies and bees
Milkweed- Butterflies and bees
Bronze Fennel- Butterflies
Red Hot Poker- Bees and Hummingbirds
Coral Bells (Red flowering types)- Hummingbirds
Red Columbine- Hummingbirds
Spearmint- Bees
Lemon Balm- Bees
Rue- Butterfly Larvae
Penstemons- Hummingbirds and bees
Hostas- Hummingbirds and bees

FLOWERING VINES

Trumpet Vine- Hummingbirds and bees
Sweet Autumn Clematis- Butterflies and bees

ANNUALS (just to name a few favorites)

Cardinal Climber
Salvias
Fuchsia

Just having these plants in your landscape alone will not make your property wildlife friendly. Wildlife friendly will only work if you are an organic gardener. Please refer to my handout on organic gardening.

Besides not being organic, there are other factors which will prevent wildlife from being happy on your property. Two of these would be outdoor cats and the perfect lawn. Cats outside will destroy many creatures. They are the only animal I can think of that kills for pleasure, not just for food. Many will kill anything they think they can manage from butterflies to toads to squirrels. I think their favorite kills are birds.

Lawn grass is the most high maintenance plant one can own. To look good, it needs fertilizer, weed control, insect control and constant grooming, all of which are harmful to wildlife and to you. Besides the chemicals which are toxic, the mowers themselves emit a lot of gas fumes. The only good mowing experience I have ever had was when I was mowing one summer and a flock of purple martins became attracted to the insects I was stirring up with my mower. They dive bombed all around me, eating the insects. My lawn (of course) is chemical free, so I was glad to have the disturbed insects.

Great lawn alternatives are Buffalo Grass and Mini Clover. They can be used as a lawn substitute since they are short and will tolerate a lot of foot traffic. The mini clover will never need mowing, while the buffalo grass will benefit from mowing every six weeks, but even that is not necessary. Both are available in seed. Buffalo grass is a prairie native which kept the large buffalo herds fed and early settlers used to build sod houses. Both need little water and no fertilizer. The mini clover has been recommended to mix with grass seed when seeding to make a tougher lawn. The clover actually fixes nitrogen in the soil acting as a natural fertilizer for your lawn.

Other plants can be used to take the place of lawns, but will not work as lawn substitutes as they would be too tall and will not tolerate much foot traffic like the buffalo grass or mini clover. They make nice **ornamental groundcovers** and will eat up a lot of land reducing the footprint of the lawn you may need. They include **for sun:** Winter creeper, crown vetch, spearmint and lemon balm. **For shade:** Vinca, dead nettle and sweet woodruff.

There are other groundcovers of course, but they will not be aggressive enough to establish before all the weeds take over. Even with these you will need to do some weed pulling or after planting spray the area down with corn gluten meal as a pre-emergent weed preventer. You can only do this if you are planting plugs, not seeding. The crown vetch, spearmint and lemon balm are available by seed. Seeding will give you more immediate thick coverage.

If you live in a neighborhood which requires a lawn to be maintained, you can still greatly reduce the footprint of your lawn with landscaping and the groundcovers listed above will be considered landscape plants by your neighborhood. A large organic vegetable garden in your backyard will also help to reduce the lawn footprint. Grow food not lawns! With a smaller lawn you will spend much less time and money maintaining and mowing your lawn. Just mow once per week to keep any weeds you may have in your lawn from rising too high or use the corn gluten meal on your lawn as a pre-emergent weed preventer. Organic lawn fertilizers are also available.

Having a property which attracts wildlife and is organic will be naturally low maintenance, but at the same time very beautiful to look at not only for the plants, but the wildlife coming into your setting. In addition to all of this, your property will also serve as a wonderful educational tool for the children in your life whether they be your own, your grandchildren, your friends' or family's.

Instead of saying to the children, "Go in and turn on the TV or the computer" you can walk them over to a place on your property where they can observe a real life experience. Maybe it's tadpoles in your water garden, honeybees on your sedum, a monarch chrysalis on a fence, hummingbirds on cardinal flower or cardinals eating dogwood berries. There are endless possibilities!

There are many activities for children to become involved in related to your wildlife friendly property.....

You can become a **certified Backyard Wildlife Habitat or Monarch Way Station**. The child can become involved in the **annual Christmas bird count** from your property, a **Nature Nut** where they report their nature sightings online or part of **FrogWatch USA**, just to name a few. They will be learning valuable skills which they can expand upon during their teenage years to consider furthering their education in a variety of environmental fields. One of Grandma's customers travels the world for GE helping them to keep their environmental footprint low.

Trying to maintain your property just for appearances gets old quickly and is not much fun. If you are able to afford it you will end up hiring the maintenance done. If not, you will spend so much time maintaining that when you are finished, you will be ready to head indoors into the A/C.

A wildlife friendly property will be healing and healthy -- a pleasure to be in and requiring little maintenance! You will go outdoors not for chores, but to enjoy and bask in the sights, sounds and fragrances of your oasis!

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