



Gardening for Wildlife Habitat

By Debbie Hagar

UCCE El Dorado County Master Gardener

Birds and butterflies will flock to your garden if you offer them cover, water and food. Backyard habitats are increasingly important as wild creatures lose more of their native habitats to development. Birds and butterflies like environments featuring many tiers of dense arrangements of deciduous and evergreen trees; under story fruiting vines and shrubs; and ground-level grasses and perennials. These tiers are a combination that supply food and cover through the seasons. Planting a mix of heights also creates safe travel corridors, and adding shrubs is the fastest way to achieve good cover.

Native plants are ideal because wildlife are familiar with these plants. Native plants are adapted to our climate and soil, and use less water once they are established. Birds are accustomed to using natives for nesting niches, nest materials, food and cover. Many native plants host insects that birds like the best. Natives offer some of the best nectar needed by pollinators, including bees, butterflies, hummingbirds and moths. Plant diversity is the best approach to gardening for wildlife habitat. Combine a variety of natives that bloom at different times to provide successive food throughout the growing season. Leave parts of the garden to grow naturally, if possible, to create havens for wildlife. Wildlife gardens also reward the procrastinator: delaying garden cleanup in the fall is good for the birds, who will help cleanup if you leave seed heads standing on annuals, perennials and grasses. Grasses serve up seed in fall and winter and, if left standing, supply nesting materials in spring.

Avoid using chemical pesticides when gardening for wildlife habitat. Chemical controls wipe out the good with the bad insects, and the effects are felt up the food chain. Pesticides kill butterflies, their larvae, beneficial insects and their predators indiscriminately. It is better to tolerate a chewed leaf or blossom and handpick voracious insects -- or knock them off plants with water from the hose. More insects equal more birds.

A birdbath is an effective way to introduce water to the garden. Birds prefer shallow basins that have a rough surface for good gripping. A birdbath should be in the open but close enough to sheltered perches for protection from predators. Add fresh water frequently and scrub the basin weekly with a stiff brush to keep it clean.

Plants that attract butterflies include host plants for the butterfly larvae and nectar plants for the adults. Host plants for caterpillars could include common yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), common fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) and wild buckwheat (*Eriogonum*). Nectar plants to attract the greatest variety of butterflies to your garden should be a selection of bright colored flowers that produce nectar throughout the season. Columbine (*Aquilegia*), butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) and Jupiter's beard (*Centranthus ruber*) are good nectar choices. Sunny areas that are sheltered from the wind are welcoming to butterflies.

Hummingbirds, like butterflies, are attracted to flowers that produce nectar. A hummingbird uses its long beak to sip nectar from tubular, bell and funnel shaped blooms. Hummingbirds most readily see red and orange but once in the garden will visit other blooms. Coral bells (*Heuchera*), Penstemons and Salvias will attract hummingbirds.

Seed and berry plants attract numerous birds to the garden. Fruit-eating birds such as robins and cedar waxwings flock to landscapes planted with toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), cotoneasters, currants (*Ribes*), and elderberry (*Sambucus*). A garden that attracts birds also helps naturally control insect pests, and hummingbirds pollinate plants as they forage for nectar. Gardening for wildlife habitat creates an environment that is alive with birds, butterflies, bees and beneficial insects.

Join Master Gardener Judy Thompson this Saturday, July 20th for a new public education class: Gardening for Wildlife Habitat. Learn how to provide food, water and shelter for creatures big and small; a beautiful and productive garden can also be a certified National Wildlife Federation haven. The free, three-hour class starts at 9:00 a.m. in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Drive, Placerville, CA.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.