

Simple Steps to a Habitat Garden

by Vera Strader

A healthy wildlife garden alive with buzzing bees and chirping birds is easier than you might think. As forests and meadows shrink, robbing wildlife of homes and food, these creatures depend increasingly on our backyards for food and nesting sites. Even with limited time and money you can create a safe harbor for wildlife.



Try the following strategies to streamline your wildlife gardening:

GO EASY ON PESTICIDES. Don't short circuit a natural system with manufactured insecticides and other toxic chemicals. An abundance of insects is a sign of a healthy garden. Let Mother Nature do the work for you. In due course, most "bad" bugs will lose out to armies of beneficial insects, birds and other predators.

RESPECT THE SOIL. Recycle as nature does. Fallen leaves, twigs and small garden trimmings benefit life both above and below the soil line. Leaf litter makes a down-like comforter for a myriad of small critters while dishing up a buffet of spiders, insects and their eggs, larvae and plant seeds. Garden litter also adds humus that enriches soil and can eliminate the need for chemical fertilizers with their potential for toxic runoff. Compost non-weedy trimmings, many kitchen scraps and barnyard manure for more free soil amendments.

LOSE THE LAWN. Our coddled lawns do little for wildlife, yet demand innumerable hours and dollars to groom, fertilize and to control weeds. Costly water lavished on thirsty grass washes lawn chemicals into storm drains and streams, sickening aquatic life and polluting oceans. If you opt for a lawn, choose among grasses that that require less water and fertilizer.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF EXISTING NATIVES. Our homes, businesses and farms were once acreage filled with native plants and animals. Native plants are especially valuable to wildlife, since for centuries they evolved together here in the Foothills. Toyon or Christmas berry, manzanita, wild gooseberries and currants (*Ribes spp.*) and elderberries are among the best for a triad of nectar, berries and insects. Sages (*Salvia spp.*) produce copious amounts of nectar, while pines, cedars and grasses supply further food and cover.

CHERISH OAK TREES. Oaks and their acorns are powerhouses of nourishment and habitat for over 80 mammal species and 170 kinds of birds. To thrive, many natives need an environment similar to that in which they adapted over the ages. In our foothills, this usually means little or no summer water. Oaks often develop a root fungus, which thrives with added moisture in summer warmth, weakening and eventually killing the tree. Oak roots spread even beyond the tree's drip line; take care to avoid digging or compacting soil within this area.

WATCH FOR FREE PLANTS. You can easily start new plants with seedlings that pop up in desirable spots around the yard and pasture. Weeding around these youngsters, plus the addition of a stake and perhaps a protective wire cage, can launch a stately oak, pine or berry-filled toyon on its way to a long, productive life.

DECLARE DEATH TO INVASIVE PLANTS. Don't plant alien invaders, for they bully out natives and threaten wildlife food and even water sources. Among the worst are periwinkle (*Vinca major*), ivy, tree of heaven, Scotch and other brooms and yellow starthistle.

WEIGH ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES. Birds greatly appreciate water. A simple birdbath will do as well as feeders and nesting boxes. Make such additions only if you can regularly clean and maintain them. Otherwise, you may do more harm than good.

There are few things more enjoyable to gardeners than seeing the fruit of their labors a-buzz with life and bursting with color. Following these strategies will help ensure an environmentally-sustainable and healthy garden.

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