

Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy

People and Wildlife Living in Harmony

Gardening for Wildlife

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By Nicole Hamilton

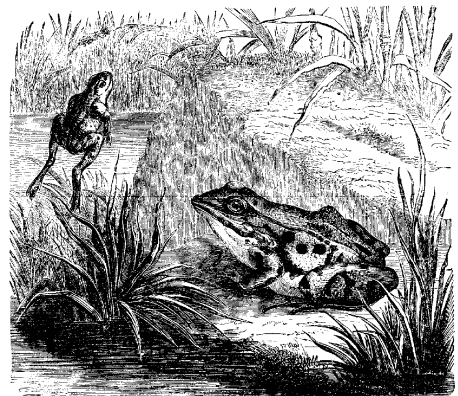
“Nature, wild nature, dwells in gardens just as she dwells in the tangled woods, in the deep of the sea, and on the heights of the mountains; and the wilder the garden, the more you will see of her.” Herbert Ravenal Sass

I first read those words when I moved to Loudoun County and was faced with gardening for the first time. I remember looking at this space of lawn that we planned to transform into a flower garden and worrying that I would do something “wrong” because I didn’t know the “rules” of gardening. However, Sass’s words stayed with me; so, as I read about gardening, I also made a small stone plaque with the words, “let your garden be a wild place.” I put that plaque at the side of the garden to remind me of his message as I dug in the dirt.

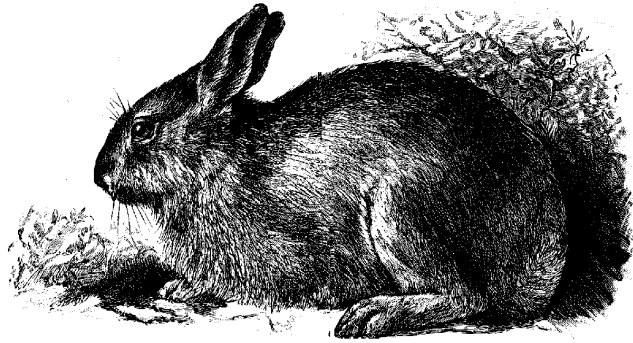
These days, that plaque is often seen crowded by milkweed, coneflower, grasses, tickseed and cardinal flowers that grow up around it, providing food for monarch caterpillars, hummingbirds and goldfinches and serving as great places for spiders to spin their orbs or dragonflies to perch. Indeed, the words proved true. The less I “clean up” the garden, the less I try to control and organize it into colors or patterns, the more wildlife, large and small, arrive, and the more fun I have.

Gardening for wildlife is rewarding and exciting in so many ways. It can be done on the smallest balconies and porches or on the largest patches of land. It gives us the opportunity to interact with nature on the most basic levels and be a part of the changing cycles of the seasons. One of the first things we see when gardening for wildlife is that everything is connected. Nature is a complex web of interrelated elements that, when working in balance, provides the elements that living things need to thrive. Through our gardening, we have the chance to see this web of life and watch its interdependencies play out right before our eyes. In this way, we can experience having a positive impact on the world around us.

Habitat is what wildlife calls home. Just as we provide food and shelter for ourselves in our houses, outdoor habitat provides many necessities for wildlife — food, shelter, sites to raise young, safe places to play, and protection from predators and harsh weather. For insects, that habitat may include soil or rotting wood where they can build nests, plants from which they can sip nectar or hunt other insects, and leaf litter within which they can gain protection. For birds, habitat may mean dead trees, tall grasses or dense bushes in which to nest, berry bushes and leaf litter in which to feed, and thickets where they



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can seek protection. For foxes, habitat may mean fallen snags of trees where they can build a den, dense shrubs to escape from predators, and grassy fields where they can play or hunt for mice.

However, just having the right elements is not enough; timing is important, too. Plants and animals have evolved together over the eons, each timing its seasonal entrance and exit to be in concert with the entrances and

exits of others. Consider the bumblebee. In the early days of March, the hibernating queen emerges from her burrow in the soil. At the same time, certain native plants that she requires to survive are starting to flower. She has only a short time before her energy reserves from the previous fall are depleted. She needs to find a nesting site, lay her eggs, and then go in search of the flowers that will feed herself and her young. With our planting lawns and non-native plants that take over the places where native plants once thrived, it becomes more difficult for her to find the flowers that she needs to survive. Non-native plants like those introduced from Europe or Asia may not bloom at the right time or may not display the same triggers to attract her to their blossoms. If she does not find the flowers she needs in time or has to travel too far, then she and her young will not survive. With her demise, countless fruit and berry bushes and flowers will not be pollinated. This means that birds will not find berries and seeds that they need, and they, too, will need to go elsewhere to survive.

The loss of open space across Loudoun, the use of pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilizers, and the proliferation of non-native plants that are sold through every nursery in our area have taken a toll on our wildlife and the health of the habitat at large. By being aware of the ecology around us, we can do things (and not do things) that will help maintain diversity and strengthen the web of life around us. Through gardening, we can help rebuild our native ecology.

Thus, when we garden for wildlife, we are really helping to build/restore habitat. I don't know of a more rewarding place to start this than in our own back yards. To begin, first take a look at the space where you want to focus your gardening. All wildlife, large and small, has four basic needs: sufficient space, shelter, food, and water.

Space: When looking at your space, realize that you can have many different types of habitat in one area. You may have an open garden area that you can plant with wildflowers for a grassland-like habitat. This may be bordered by trees where you can also plant shrubs for a woodland habitat. You can add water features and rock gardens to accommodate wildlife that prefer those habitats, too. The amount of space and type of habitat you have available will play a key role in the specific wildlife that will be attracted to your area. If you are working with a small space such as a deck, you might want to focus on providing the elements needed for butterflies and hummingbirds to visit. This will include an assortment of plants that have open flowers, as well as tubular ones, in colors ranging from yellows to especially reds. For an amazing experience, you can plant milkweeds such as butterflyweed with its pretty orange

flowers. In doing so, you may attract a female monarch butterfly looking to lay its eggs on the milkweed in August. You can then watch the caterpillars devour your milkweed plants and later reward you with the opportunity to see a butterfly emerge and fly off on its way to Mexico in the fall.

If you have a larger space such as a yard with which to work, you can develop layers of habitat that include tall trees that provide a canopy, mid-range trees and shrubs that provide an understory, and wildflowers and native grasses to provide a foundation and open space. The more complex and diverse the habitat, the more life it will be able to support.

Shelter: Shelter needs to be looked at from a couple of different aspects — species as well as the purpose of the shelter: protection from predators, buffers from harsh weather, and nesting sites for raising young. During the winter, birds and other animals need dense shrubbery where they can be protected from harsh winds and snow. During summer, this same shrubbery can provide nesting sites or places to hide from predators. For some animals, like raccoons and foxes, shelter may be a den that they make in an old, hollowed out tree. So, it's good to leave these old snags around. Rabbits appreciate the thickets or other low-growing shrubbery where they can escape a pursuant fox or hawk. Butterflies need shelter, too. Many are not strong fliers and prefer to visit flowers that are buffered from the winds. At night, they go into wooded areas to sleep on branches of trees. You can also augment natural shelter such as these with other garden elements that you build or buy such as birdhouses, bumblebee nest boxes, and toad houses.

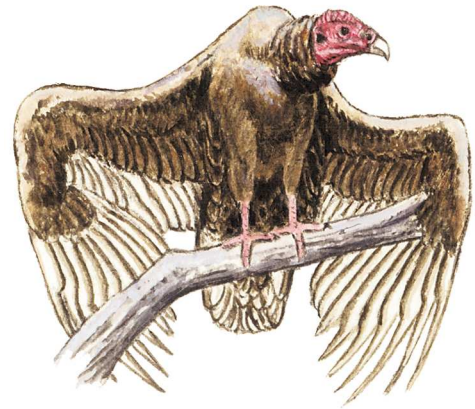
Food: Food for wildlife is as varied as there are animals. When selecting trees, bushes, and wildflowers for your garden, select varieties that provide benefit to the wildlife that you are interested in attracting. On the LWC website we have compiled a “Gardening for Wildlife” plant guide that you can download. It lists native trees, shrubs and wildflowers as well as the wildlife that each plant attracts/benefits. If you enjoy butterflies, by all means plant flowers to attract adults as they pass by, but if you really want to enjoy butterflies, plant host plants for the caterpillars to eat. As you garden, you will see more and more insects move in. These will include spiders, crickets, grasshoppers, beetles, moths, flies, and more. This is a sign of successful wildlife gardening because in order to garden for birds, for example, we have to garden for insects. Similarly, if we really want to garden for butterflies, we also have to garden for caterpillars. Insects serve as the food for others up the food chain: songbirds, mice, voles, snakes and others. These creatures in turn serve as food for others higher in the food chain: owls, foxes, hawks, and so on. So, celebrate the insects when they come! They will reward you ten-fold with the wildlife they support up the food chain.

Water: Every living creature needs water. You can provide water by setting up a birdbath. One that sits on the ground provides water for more animals than a post mounted version since some animals may not feel comfortable crawling up to reach a higher water source. Alternatively, you can build a large or small pond. Even a small pond of three or four feet



in diameter will attract frogs that will take up residence. Butterflies enjoy “puddling,” so they need a shallow pan with dirt, sand and pebbles that they can land on to sip the water. Because they generally puddle in order to get salts and minerals, you will need to add some of these to attract them as well.

As you plan your garden or augment an existing garden space, keep these four needs in the back of your mind and continually identify elements that you can add to fill each of these requirements. Look at your surroundings from the perspective of wildlife. A rock wall or pile of rocks, for example, provides a welcoming spot where toads and salamanders will find a home. A pile of leaves and twigs will provide an over-wintering spot for an angling butterfly or other insects. An old tree will provide wood for a woodpecker to carve a nest cavity that will later be reused by owls, bluebirds, chickadees or squirrels.



Gardening for wildlife is a very broad topic. To learn more, I recommend exploring some of the many excellent books that are available on the topic. A few of my favorites include:

Gardening for Wildlife by Craig Tufts and Peter Lower, Rodale Press, 1995. [Describes gardening for different wildlife habitats —woodland gardens, meadow gardens, and water gardens — and provides specific information on gardening for birds, butterflies and nightlife.]

Attracting Backyard Wildlife by Bill Merilees, Voyageur Press, 1989. [Describes gardening for birds through the seasons as well as gardening for butterflies and bugs, reptiles, small mammals, and amphibians.]

Creating Small Habitats for Wildlife in Your Garden by Josie Briggs, Guild of Master Craftsman Publications, 2002. [Detailed descriptions of specific habitats and directions on how to build garden elements. As it is written for a British audience, the plant lists will not be useful.]

The Wildlife Sanctuary Garden by Carol Buchanan, Ten Speed Press, 1999. [Provides information on designing a wildlife sanctuary using native plants, creating a wetland/pond area, and employing benign pest control.]

Birdscaping Your Garden by George Adams, Rodale Press, 1998. [Provides information on habitat needs by bird species, including specific trees and shrubs preferred by each bird.]

Butterfly Gardening: Creating a Butterfly Haven in Your Garden by Thomas Emmel, Friedman/Fairfax Publishers, 1997. [Provides some ideas for laying out a butterfly garden as well as plant lists. It also provides a page on each of the more common butterflies and identifies the habitat, nectar, and host plants they seek.]

Some guiding principles for wildlife gardening:

Plant Native: Research the plants you would like to plant ahead of time — focusing on native plants — and take a list with you to the nursery or garden shop. Include their Latin names as common names can be deceiving. Native plants are not only a better fit in meeting the needs of our wildlife, but they also grow better and require less maintenance because they were “made” for our location.

Eliminate the Use of Pesticides and Herbicides: Spraying pesticides and herbicides may seem like a quick fix, but they actually disrupt the natural balance. They poison the soils. In addition, while pesticides may appear to kill the intended target insects, they also kill other insects that may in fact be working to keep the offending insects at bay. This leads to a vicious cycle of spraying and disruption of the balance of nature. Pesticides also kill butterflies, moths, wasps, bees and other insects that are critical to the cycles of pollination, and they poison frogs and salamanders. Also, birds and other wildlife often become sick from eating insects that have been sprayed. Herbicides have similar negative effects that disrupt the balance, making us dependent on chemical companies to manage our gardens because we eliminate the natural mechanisms. Trust nature’s food chain and natural predators to take care of pest populations. This is the wiser road in the long run.

Leave Piles: Wildlife love piles of leaves and brush. They provide safe havens for birds and small mammals, as well as great places for insects.

Plant with Diversity: The more diverse the plants the more diverse the wildlife that will be attracted. Mixtures of textures and colors in plantings provide greater camouflage for animals when they need to hide. On a spray of yellow flowers, a brown bird will stand out and be a prime target for a predator, but in a mix of grasses, small shrubs and varied wildflowers, the bird will blend in and feel safe.

Relax and enjoy . . . and let your garden be a wild place. The less manicured your garden, the more shelter, food, and nesting sites it will provide. You will be rewarded with a variety of colorful sights and sounds, buzzes and flashes, at night and during the day.