

Native Plants & Your Habitat



BACKYARD WILDLIFE
HABITAT™
NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION®

From the mosses and ferns to the largest of our trees, plants have carpeted habitats in North America for millions of years. As mixed communities of hundreds or thousands of species, plants form the basis for the life of the wildlife which inhabits the continent. Over geologic time, the distribution of these plants has changed repeatedly and species have

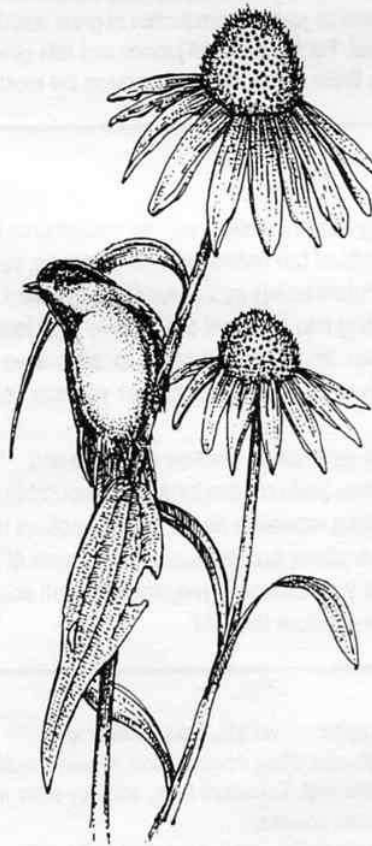
evolved, flourished and become extinct.

For your Backyard Wildlife Habitat project, we suggest that you grow those plants which we are reasonably sure shaded the streams or reached for the sun, in the forests or meadows, prairies or deserts of your local area at the time of European colonization of this land.

The Case for Locally Native Plants

The wildlife in our communities prosper amid locally native plants. However, there are many hundreds of species of exotic plants available for sale, originally from Asia, Europe, Africa, or Australia, that now cover home landscapes in North America. These plants cannot sustain the wildlife with which we share our communities. Though these plants may offer birds fruit, squirrels nuts, and hummingbirds and butterflies nectar, they do not provide the entire range of seasonal habitat benefits that an appropriate locally native species will provide.

If we want not only to satisfy our desires to attract wildlife, but also to restore the critical, often unseen small pieces in our ecosystems, we need to bring back our locally native plants. These plants meet the food and cover needs of all wildlife species: bees, wasps and butterflies, flies and grasshoppers, bugs, beetles and spiders and thousands of others that sustain and support food



webs which songbirds and chipmunks, salamanders and bats, toads and box turtles more visibly demonstrate. At the bottom of the food web, native plants far outperform exotic plants that have characterized wildlife landscaping for much of the past century. Native species also provide excellent cover for wildlife, require no fertilization and once established, do not require watering.

The Case against Exotics

An equally important reason to use locally native plants is to lessen the possibility that exotic plants from our landscapes will run wild. Generally, native plants do not become invasive; that is, they will not reproduce rampantly, invading and impoverishing the diversity of our remaining natural habitats as an increasing number of exotic plants now do. Exotic invasives that have been popular in wildlife gardening but that should not be planted include purple loosestrife, multiflora and Cherokee roses, Asiatic bush honeysuckles, Japanese honeysuckle, autumn and Russian olive, burning bush euonymus and many others.

Natives -- More than a Reasonable Replacement

There are locally native plant species which meet virtually any landscaping need, while replacing the monotony of the few exotics that so dominate our landscapes and the tyranny of the exotic invasives which depopulate our woodlands, roadsides and meadows. Some very frequently used plants are so widespread that when they become susceptible to disease, major efforts will be needed to restore our landscapes. Popular exotics include Photinia (red tip), privets, raphiolepis (Indian hawthorn), oleander, many roses, euonymus and hybrid azaleas.

Two trees which dot hundreds of thousands of landscapes, residential and commercial, in the United States and offer little of value to wildlife are Leyland cypress and Bradford pear. The cypress is a cross of two western United States natives which would never hybridize in nature. The trees are sterile. The Bradford pear, a horticultural artifact, is not found normally in nature and originated in China.

Serviceberry for Bradford Pear - An Exchange

The Bradford pear bursts out with a mass of white blooms in mid-spring and closes the season with a brilliant flash of red foliage. It is a brittle, early blooming but foul smelling ornamental that provides some seasonal cover for birds. Even earlier blooming is a group of native trees, known regionally as shadbush, juneberry, serviceberry or sarvis, which is the first showy native to bloom in many parts of the country, its white flowers even profuse under the edges of woodlands. It dazzles in the fall with foliage that may be red, salmon or orange. In the winter, its smooth gray bark adds interest to any landscape. From bloom time through the early summer, its flowers and fruits invite a succession of native wildlife, insects intent on taking away pollen and nectar for their young and, in doing so, fertilizing the thousands of flowers that this rose family member produces. In May, June or July, quantities of its small fruit attract thrushes, waxwings, orioles, catbirds and dozens of other songbirds. In contrast, the small hard fruit of the Bradford pear attracts only the European starling, a bird few wish to invite to their habitat.

Eastern Redcedar or Rocky Mountain Juniper for Leyland Cypress - An Exchange

If the hybrid cypress, an evergreen, were replaced with a regionally adapted U.S. native juniper, such as eastern redcedar or Rocky Mountain juniper, a great variety of birds would not only benefit from the cover that the junipers and cypress all provide, but much more from the female junipers' production of great quantities of fruits and the junipers' shreddy bark used by so many birds for nesting material. For the beautiful juniper and little olive hairstreak butterflies, whose caterpillars clandestinely feed only on juniper foliage, these native trees are perhaps the most critical element in their habitat.

Actions for Local Natives

Our landscapes, carefully planted with locally native species, can be instruments to restore native plants to our communities and natural open spaces. Birds will carry the seeds of our natives into wild spaces, reversing the trend which makes "good birds bad" as they are often the main carriers of exotic plant seeds into natural environment.

If exotic plants in your landscape are spreading into adjacent areas, give your local habitat a break, and give yourself an opportunity. Get rid of one exotic invasive this year, and replace it with a locally native species. Your state natural heritage agency will provide you with a list of exotic invasives as well as techniques you can use to eliminate them.

Like any other plant we select and grow, natives must be chosen with care and knowledge and carefully planted. Choosing a native plant means locating a reputable source for these species. The best source for finding reputable native plant suppliers is your state native plant or wildflower society. Native plants are increasingly available at nurseries and garden centers. Always check that your source is propagating from seed or cuttings obtained in a responsible manner. Never dig from the wild.

Internet Resources

National Wildlife Federation (www.nwf.org): Landscaping for wildlife, links, bibliography.
Native Plant Conservation Initiative (www.nps.gov/plants): Plant conservation, invasive exotics.
Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center (www.wildflower.org): Extensive links, state-by-state native plant lists, and links to state and local native plant societies.
The Nature Conservancy (www.tnc.org): Natural Heritage Program information and contacts.
Wild Ones, Ltd. (www.for-wild.org): Grassroots projects, naturalistic landscaping, plant salvages.

