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Advice to Grow By … Ask Us!

ATTRACT SOME WILDLIFE TO YOUR GARDEN

By Barbara J. Euser

Sitting on the bench in my garden, I listen to four different birds' songs; I watch a hummingbird zip past, then pause to rest on the branch of a Monterey pine; I observe the full loads of pollen carried by our bees into their hives. White-and-black butterflies hover over garden blossoms. This wildlife and more thrives in our garden because we practice sustainable gardening.

Sustainable gardening is the popular umbrella term that covers gardening that conserves water, uses minimal (or no) chemicals, focuses on native plant species and requires a minimum of maintenance by the gardener. It is a holistic approach to gardening that could also be termed self-sustaining because this type of garden does not require excessive input of water, plant material or human effort. Low-water, drought-tolerant, xeriscape, native, low-maintenance and habitat gardens all fall within the purview of sustainable gardening.

One aspect of sustainable gardening that particularly interests me is habitat gardening - that is gardening with a special awareness of providing food, water and cover for wildlife, as well as places animals may raise their young.

A sustainable garden that is wildlife-friendly includes:

- FOOD SOURCES: Plants provide basic food for wildlife in the form of seeds, berries, nuts, fruits, nectar, sap, pollen, and foliage and twigs. Of course, in the garden ecosystem, some animals may become food for other animals, for example caterpillars or insects provide nourishment for birds.

- WATER SOURCES: Wildlife must have water to drink and in which to bathe. A water source in the garden may be a spring, a stream or a lake. For those of us without those natural resources, an artificial pond, a pump-driven fountain, a cement birdbath or even a depression in a stone can serve as a life-giving water source.

- COVER AND PROTECTION: Wildlife need protection from predators and shelter and cover from the weather. Dense shrubs, brambles, evergreens, rock piles or walls, and wooded areas provide protection and shelter. A little messiness, in the form of piles of branches or untrimmed shrubs, around the edges of a garden can provide a refuge for birds and mammals.

- PLACES FOR YOUNG WILDLIFE: To succeed as a habitat, a garden must provide a place for wildlife to bear and raise their young. Ideal locations are places predators have a hard time invading. These include mature trees, dead trees or snags, thickets or dense shrubs, wetlands and burrows. If your garden does not include any of these, home-made nesting boxes are an alternative. To create a habitat for butterflies, learn which plants are hosts for the larvae (caterpillars) of a given species and plant them in your garden. For example, milkweed is a host plant for larvae of the monarch butterfly; California Dutchman's pipe is a host plant for larvae of the pipevine swallowtail butterfly.

- SUSTAINABLE GARDENING PRACTICES: The way we manage the weeds, soil and water in our gardens affects the general habitat for wildlife living there. Chemicals from synthetic pesticides and fertilizers

may be toxic to the insects and birds we are trying to encourage. Pulling weeds by hand is labor-intensive, but that can be minimized by heavy mulching, which will prevent the growth of weeds in the first place.

As an alternative to synthetic fertilizers, soil can be improved with organic fertilizer such as the sustainable aged manure produced by sheep or cows. Compost is a sustainable fertilizer because it is created from the waste plant material of the garden itself. Make compost tea by soaking compost in water, then use that water on thirsty plants.

Water in the garden should be managed to minimize waste. Xeriscape or water-wise landscaping will reduce the cost of irrigation, as will drip systems and soaker hoses. To reduce erosion of wildlife habitat, plant ground covers - preferably native species - or build terraces.

If you are interested in creating a sustainable habitat garden, you may want to learn about the National Wildlife Federation's (NWF) Certified Wildlife Habitat program.

In order to qualify for certification, in addition to providing food, water, places for cover and places to raise young, gardeners must also demonstrate that their gardens employ sustainable gardening techniques, including mulching and composting, without using synthetic fertilizer. The program is aimed at educating gardeners and their communities about the interaction between gardening practices and nurturing wildlife. More information is available at www.nwf.org/certify