

Thoughts on Gardening for Wildlife

As gardeners, we have a genetic and inborn love of all living things. To devote all or part of our gardens to birds, butterflies, insects, and small animals is lending a needed hand to Mother Nature. Of course, some wildlife like rabbits, woodchucks, moles, deer, and snakes are not always welcome.



Colorado DNR

To attract wildlife, the number one requirement is food. Native grasses, flowers, shrubs, and trees are adapted to this area and provide nectar, pollen, berries, nuts, leaves, and seeds needed by a wide range of creatures. Native trees, conifers, and shrubs also provide needed shelters to birds and animals. Most natives are easy to maintain, but it can be frustrating to try to grow very difficult plants like our state flower, the Lady Slipper Orchid. Some natives can be invasive due to runners or abundant seed production. Take care to plant native species in correct locations such as—sun or shade, boggy or dry soil, acid or alkaline soil, humus rich or sandy/rocky lean soil.

Red flowers, native and non-native, will attract hummingbirds. Many varieties of sunflowers have been developed from native species. These, along with Echinacea (coneflowers) provide food for a wide variety of birds and squirrels. Forests of sunflowers in the backyard will also attract grandchildren. Research your possibilities on the web, in the library, at local watershed district offices, or at nature centers. Expert information is available.

Autumn is an ideal time for planning and planting a wildlife garden. Many of our wildflowers, trees, and shrubs ripen their seeds in late summer or autumn. If these seeds sprouted soon after ripening, the young and tender plants would face Minnesota's brutal winters in short order. Many of these seeds contain a natural, inhibiting chemical that prevents fall-time germination. After enduring the cold of winter, the inhibitor breaks down and the seeds sprout when warm springtime arrives. This natural reluctance of native seeds to sprout can be overcome by a process called stratification. This is best done in late winter or early spring. Moisten peat moss or planting mix in a zip-lock plastic bag, mix in the native seeds, and place into your refrigerator compartment for 6-8 weeks. Most native seeds will sprout after this treatment when brought to room temperature. Plant in trays indoors, or if it is mild enough in the spring, outdoors. Sources of native seeds and plants include Prairie Moon Nursery (Winona, MN), Prairie Nursery (Westfield, WI), Landscape Alternatives (Shafer, MN), Outback Nursery (Hastings, MN), and Glacial Ridge Growers (Prior Lake, MN). The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources web site also lists local sources. Some watershed districts offer grants or cost share programs for native plantings.

Bird feeders, hummingbird feeders, and squirrel feeders attract wildlife. Nearby shrubs, conifers, or small trees provide protection as birds fly to and from feeders. Remember to place bird feeders away from overhanging trees and high enough to discourage squirrels and cats. A baffle or a metal stovepipe around the support pole might also discourage them. Squirrels are beautiful and highly intelligent animals. In fact, if humans become extinct, I am absolutely convinced that squirrels will take over the world. Squirrels deserve a feeder all their own, far from the birdfeeders. Remember to keep all feeders clean to prevent disease.

A source of water will attract small mammals, birds, butterflies, and amphibians.

The National Wildlife Federation website (<http://www.nwf.org/gardenforwildlife/>) lists additional information for wildlife gardening. It will even certify your yard as wildlife habitat.

Happy Gardening, Joe Baltrukonis