

WILDLIFE HABITAT IN THE GARDEN

Gardening provides us with a chance to see many other living things right outside our doors. This brings fascination, delight, and beauty to our yards and gives us insight into the natural world. It also offers us the opportunity to help preserve biodiversity and protect the environment by supporting habitat for wildlife of all kinds. Making your garden inviting to all kinds of creatures takes just a few simple steps that you can do in almost any space.

BASIC NEEDS

The necessities for insects, birds, reptiles and amphibians, and mammals vary – but all species have a few essential requirements in common.

Food

Plants provide nectar, pollen, seeds, nuts, berries and other fruit, and leaves and stems that a wide range of creatures feed upon. Many other creatures consume plant-eating species, forming an extensive “food web” around a garden. By including native plants in your landscape, which were growing in the mid-Atlantic region before the first Europeans arrived, in your landscape you link the plants and wildlife that have evolved together over a long period of time to mutually support each other’s needs.

Water

All creatures need water for drinking and some need it for bathing or breeding. Backyard ponds, water gardens, or small fountains can support many different species. If your space is limited, a bird bath or just a small dish of water you replenish regularly will be valuable to wildlife.

Shelter

An ungrouted corner of your yard will become a haven in which many kinds of wildlife can nest and hide from predators. This is especially critical in fall and winter, when other food sources and shelter may be limited. Leave spent plants, leaf litter, and other natural debris in place when the growing season ends so wildlife will stay in your yard during their dormant period and raise the next generation there when they re-emerge in spring.

Safety

Many commonly used lawn and garden chemicals are toxic to wildlife. Synthetic fertilizers gradually raise the soil’s salt content and kills off microbes in the soil, affecting the entire underground food web, including earthworms,

and the other species that rely on them. Broad-spectrum insecticides don’t discriminate between beneficial insects and pests. Protect wildlife by using safe, effective organic products in your garden.

INSECTS

Your garden is a resource for thousands, if not millions, of insects, including butterflies, moths, and their larvae (caterpillars), bees and wasps, beetles, spider, flies and many more. Each of them – even those we wish didn’t munch on our plants, plays a vital role in the food web. The most reliable way to keep pests under control is to make your garden hospitable to their predators, such as the tiny parasitic wasps that lay their eggs in destructive tomato hornworms. Plant a wide variety of flowers and herbs in your garden to attract the most diverse population of insects.

Bees and other pollinators are important to our food supply and to the harvest you get from a vegetable garden. While most of us are familiar with honey-bee hives, solitary native species are just as critical to pollinating common crops. These insects rely on nectar from flowers throughout the growing season. You can ensure they will come and stay in your garden if you have different plants blooming continuously from spring to fall.

Some butterflies and moths are generalists that feed on a wide range of plants. Others depend on specific plants to survive—the endangered monarch butterfly, for instance, needs native milkweed for its larvae. Stones with depressions that collect water help attract many kinds of butterflies and moths.



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BIRDS

Birds bring brilliant colors and relaxing sounds to your garden. Many of them feed on garden pests, too. You may already recognize many of the birds that frequent backyards and city plots, such as cardinals, blue jays, and sparrows. These tend to be year-round residents. Seasonal species, such as ruby-throated hummingbirds, often visit gardens in the mid-Atlantic region but spend winter in other areas. Many less-common migratory birds also stop by gardens as they pass through on their travels.

Seeds and fruit are important food sources for birds. Grow plants such as native purple coneflowers and sunflowers that produce an abundance of seeds for birds to eat after they finish blooming. Native shrubs, like hollies and viburnums, bear berries that ripen in fall when birds need them most.

Hedgerows and trees provide places for nesting. Some types of birds prefer dead, dying, and hollow trees. Leave them in your landscape unless they are a threat to people or property. If you let last season's plants stay in your garden over the winter, birds will use the stems to perch on and in spring they will gather decaying plants to make new nests. Bird houses will attract species such as the Eastern bluebird to gardens.

BATS

Despite their spooky reputation, bats are beneficial to gardeners because they are voracious consumers of mosquitoes and other night-flying insects. You can watch as they flutter around overhead at dusk, eating the biting pests. Bats keep their distance from people and pets, so they are no threat to anyone but their prey.

You can set up a simple house in your yard that will attract bats and provide them with a place to roost. The houses are easy to build yourself or you can buy one at a garden center or online. The ideal location for a bat house is at least 15 feet high and in a sunny spot.

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Toads and frogs, turtles, lizards, and garter snakes visit and may even make their homes in gardens. They feed on slugs, insects, and other small creatures. An accessible water supply is especially important to them. Reptiles and amphibians often find shelter around a small pile of rocks or in groundcover plants and leaf litter.

MAMMALS

Gardens attract many kinds of animals, including deer, foxes, squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, raccoons, opossums, skunks, woodchucks, mice, and moles. They can be fun to watch in your yard, but some can also be destructive by eating up plants before they mature or digging in garden beds.

There are many devices and strategies for preventing wildlife damage in garden, from noisy whirligigs to flashing lights to foul-smelling sprays. The safest and most reliable approach is fencing around the plants you want to protect. The design and set-up vary depending on what species you are trying to control. Check online sources for the type of fence that is most suitable for your needs.

FAST FACT

"Biological communities rich in species are substantially healthier and more productive than those depleted of species." - U.S. Geological Survey report published in 2016.

LEARN MORE

[National Wildlife Federation: Designing Your Wildlife Garden](#)

[USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service: Wildlife Habitat](#)

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