



More Garden Dirt

Great garden tips from Living Landscapes!

Creating a Wildlife Sanctuary

In my grandmother's time, feeding birds was a matter of going to the garden center to get a birdfeeder and some wild birdseed. Birds appreciated snacking at an overflowing feeder, but they gathered most of their nourishment from fruits, nuts, seeds, nectar and insects found in the wild.

Unfortunately, as we've grown, procreated and built homes to shelter our human families, we've also cut a devastating swath through areas that once sheltered the families of birds and other wildlife. As these wild areas have diminished, animals have had fewer places to feed, nest and seek safety from predators.

Some things are impossible to repair, but in this case there's definitely something we can do. In fact, making a substantial difference for numerous species of birds and other wild animals is as simple as removing some of your lawn and planting shrubs or perennials instead!

It seems that America's lawns occupy 30 – 40 million acres of land and the mowers used to tend them are responsible for a whopping 5% of our nation's air pollution. If a good percentage of homeowners were to replace just a 3' x 3' patch of lawn with other plantings, it would provide tens of thousands of acres of better wildlife habitat while it saved well over a million hours of mowing!

So, if you'd like to invite more birds to your home, keep these points in mind: birds need sources of food and water and places to shelter and nest that are pesticide and herbicide free. The best sources of food for birds are the "native" plants that have evolved along with them.

Fortunately, native plants are well adapted to their region and subsequently, are easy to grow there. They require less food, water and overall intervention than non-native plants. Most important, native plants provide seeds and fruit for birds and act as hosts for insects. They also offer safe, recognizable nesting sites and protection from predators and bad weather.

One of South Jersey's well known native plants, the highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) is a favorite of 30 different species of birds including robins, catbirds, mockingbirds, cardinals, Eastern bluebirds, and scarlet tanagers. Eastern red cedar, also well adapted to our sandy, acidic soil and windy coastline, attracts cedar waxwings, purple finches, downy woodpeckers, Northern flickers and



Bird/Wildlife Sanctuary continued –

yellow-bellied sapsuckers. Dogwood, serviceberry, crabapple, winterberry, beautyberry, elderberry, holly, viburnum, bee balm, coneflower, cardinal lobelia, coreopsis...the list of trees, shrubs and perennials that will nourish and protect birds is endless and offers endless possibilities to beautify your home as well.

As you add to your landscape, try to connect planted areas to create a safe “wildlife corridor.” Specifically, connect your front yard to the back and your yard to your neighbor’s with tiered plantings that suggest more natural settings.

For instance, instead of marooning a tree in a mulched ring in the middle of the yard, plant several. Then, plant smaller understory trees beneath the larger ornamental and shade trees. Plant shrubs, perennials and groundcovers under the second tier of trees. Your yard will not only begin to be more appealing to wildlife, it will begin to feel more natural, more welcoming and more appealing to you too.

To further enhance visiting birds’ opportunities for forage and cover, be a little less meticulous about raking your leaves. Allow a bit of leaf litter to collect under and in front of your shrubs. Then, while you lie in a hammock, since you have less mowing and raking to do, you can relax and enjoy watching the birds as they hop, scratch and feast their way through your shrubbery.

Sources of water can be as sophisticated as a pond or as simple as a water-filled dish. The only requirement is that the vessel be clean and the water fresh. The sound of a splashing fountain will not only call to thirsty birds, it’ll soothe your world-weary nerves with its music!

Last, when you choose to make your yard more habitable to birds and other wildlife by avoiding the use of pesticides and herbicides, you also make it more habitable for yourself, your children and your pets. And yes, you are allowing more insects to live, but some of those insects will benefit you by devouring the pesky ones and still others will be happily eaten by the birds that have come to dine.

It may take a leap of faith to let your yard go “wild,” but it won’t take long for nature to find its balance, and it’ll take even less time for you to find that it’s more fun to spend your Saturdays watching birds, than it was to spend them mowing, raking and spraying!