



Attracting Beneficials to the Backyard

The Naturally Beautiful Backyards Program promotes backyard gardeners as habitat managers. Creating a chemical-free yard and garden attracts beneficial insects and wildlife. By **attracting beneficials the need for pesticides is greatly reduced or eliminated** and creates healthy, vital micro-ecosystems. A single backyard habitat manager can be effective in a localized area. Multiple backyard habitat managers become cornerstones of healthy communities. While each backyard is unique, every backyard, garden, or patio is a habitat and by developing awareness of the needs of local birds, insects, and other animals and by taking a few simple steps to help provide for those needs, urban backyards can become highly effective, chemical-free wildlife habitats.

In creating a backyard habitat remember that all of nature's creatures look for the same three life requirements: food, water, and shelter. Providing the basics of survival for a number of species is dependent only on a little observation, planting and water provision awareness, patience, and some tolerance. Following is a look at a few common backyard guests and their basic requirements for a healthy environment.

Birds

- Provide a birdbath or natural water area for birds. A birdbath should be no more than 2-3" deep as birds are wary of deep water and prefer a textured, gradual "walk-in area" to the deeper portion of the bath. Stones or a lip for birds to land on is a benefit. Place birdbaths in a sheltered area with trees and shrubs adequate distance away to discourage cats but close enough (10-12') to provide shelter if a predator is nearby.
- Conifers and other evergreens, as well as dense deciduous plants, shelter roosting birds from predators and wind, rain, and snow. Needle and broad-leaved evergreen trees and shrubs, such as white pines, arborvitae, spruce, junipers, cedars and hollies provide essential winter protection as well as food.
- Birds that overwinter in your garden need to find food 365 days of the year. Small birds eat almost constantly during daylight hours in the winter. Migratory songbirds need large amounts of food for varying amounts of time, often just a day or two. Plants native to your region because they are familiar and accepted as food sources, shelter, and nest sites. Native fruits and berries ripen on a schedule that coincides with natural needs at nesting and migration times, or during winter months.

Butterflies

- When creating a butterfly habitat provide a sunny, open area that is sheltered from the wind. Butterflies rarely take flight when temperatures are less than 60 degrees.
- Butterflies require minerals as well as water and are unable to drink from open water. They get the moisture and minerals they need from moist areas; this is called “mud-puddling.” To create a source for butterflies to mud-puddle, fill a container with wet sand placing it level with surrounding soil or on a stump or birdbath if predators are of concern. Place a few twigs and rocks on top of the sand for perches.
- Butterflies are unable to hover like bees so plantings with umbel, daisy-like petals, or composite flower stalks work the most effectively for butterfly attraction. Butterflies are also drawn by fermenting fruit, especially grapes.

Bees

- There are nearly 4,000 species of native bees in North America which are divided into two groups, solitary bees and social bees.
- Most native bees forage within 300 yards of their nesting site as long as adequate pollen and nectar producing plants are available. Bees prefer flowers in blue, purple, yellow, and white and that are easily accessible.
- Solitary bees nest in various locations dependent on the species. Approximately one third of solitary bees utilize tunnels found in snags, beetle burrows, or within the central pith of stems. Most solitary bees, however, create tunnels in well-drained soil with some vegetation for protection. Ground-dwelling solitary females create intricate multi-chambered tunnels for brood cells.
- Native social bees, known as bumble bees, live in colonies similar to non-native honey bees although native bumble bees live in hives consisting of only a few dozen bees unlike the massive hives of honey bees. Social bees forage and nest-build as a collective unit. Social bees will find suitable nesting sites in hollowed trees and wall spaces but similarly to solitary bees the majority of social bee nests are underground.
- Native plants are the most useful plants to native bees. These plants are adapted to the environment around them as well as the native insect population. Flowers on native plants in the Pacific Northwest lend themselves to the foraging needs of native bee populations.

Herps

- The study of reptiles and amphibians is called herpetology. In the Pacific Northwest there are about 50 native species of herps. Half are amphibians (frogs, toads, salamanders, and newts), and half are reptiles (snakes, lizards, and turtles).
- Sites near or adjacent to undeveloped areas are more likely to have active herp wildlife but yard features can be added to attract herps such as ponds, rock walls, brush piles, and sun-basking sites. These features provide places for herps to reproduce, feed, bask, shelter, and hibernate.

- Rock piles or rock walls are excellent habitat for herps. Place a rock pile where it receives both sun and shade each day in moderate climates. Hotter climates require more shade and cooler climates require more hours of direct sunlight.

Bats

- Bat species are not only highly effective insect deterrents but are also important pollinators and dispersers of seeds in many ecosystems throughout the world.
- Bats are not blind. Bats are divided into two groups, the *mega-chiroptera* and the *micro-chiroptera*. The mega-chiroptera, commonly known as fruit bats or “flying foxes,” rely on vision to navigate and find food. The micro-chiroptera utilize echolocation to fly and catch insects and other prey. The micro-chiroptera are the most common bats in the Pacific Northwest
- Bats range in size from a six-foot wingspan to the size of a bumblebee.
- Some common places for bats to roost are caves, abandoned mines, cliffs, rocks, wood piles, trees, under bridges, and in attics and old buildings. It is important not to disturb a bat roost and to leave as many habitat areas as possible untouched. Leave dead trees (snags), wetland and forest areas, and cave systems in their natural state to attract and maintain bat habitat.

There are many reasons to attract beneficial wildlife to the yard and garden. The healthier the backyard environment is the larger variety of wildlife will be attracted. Becoming a backyard habitat steward takes some time and energy to establish but the benefits are worth the work.

For more information on attracting beneficial animals and insects to the yard and garden contact the NBB Office at (360) 891-1992 or attend a Natural Gardening Techniques Workshop.