

The Basics of Wildlife-friendly Gardening

Gardening with wildlife in mind is a fantastic opportunity to not only help your garden flourish but to also support wildlife and ecosystems which provide us pollination and pest control services, among others. Best of all, it's easy to do and beautiful too! The Canadian Wildlife Federation's Gardening for Wildlife program has webinars, articles, tools, posters and more to help you discover, appreciate and support your local and migratory wild neighbours. CWF also has a Garden Habitat Certification where we give official recognition to those whose efforts are supporting wildlife.

GET OFFICIAL RECOGNITION FOR YOUR EFFORTS

If your outside space currently supports wildlife with natural sources of food, water, shelter and by using earth-friendly gardening practices, you could be eligible for CWF certification through our Garden Habitat Certification. Once certified, you can purchase a sign to showcase your efforts and inspire others in your community. Read on to discover what you'll need.

INCLUDE KEY HABITAT ELEMENTS

By including natural sources of food, water, shelter and by maintaining your space in a manner that is safe for wildlife, you can make your garden both beautiful *and* beneficial.

Food | You can provide a variety of food by growing a diversity of plant types and species. For instance, most native evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs provide flowers for pollinators and all then produce fruit, seeds or nuts for birds and other animals. They will also attract insects that are a critical food source for many of our garden birds. Perennials can also help with flowers and seeds in this manner. The diversity is key. For instance, warblers look for insects along different layers of trees and shrubs, depending upon the species, and juncos and many sparrows feed on perennial seed heads.

Water | Providing water can be as simple as a shallow dish from the kitchen or as fancy as a store bought bird bath. It can also be an installed pond and/or recirculating stream. The key point for dishes and bird baths is to keep them clean. This means washing often and rinsing very well if using anything more than hot water and stiff brush. It also means changing water often, especially in hot weather. This keeps harmful bacteria and breeding mosquitoes at bay. The key point for larger installed features like ponds is to ensure the sides are sloped so if any wildlife were to fall in, they can climb out. Where a side is not sloped, consider adding stones or logs along the edge to help an animal climb up. Native plants are just as important with water features as with plants on dry land so check the species you install before purchasing as many are invasive and can escape domestic ponds to nearby aquatic ecosystems.

Shelter | A diversity of plants is as important for shelter as it is with food. When you think about how diverse our local and migratory species are, it's no wonder they need equally diverse places to nest, rest and hide from predators and inclement weather. In addition to shrubs and trees, low growing plants grouped together can provide shelter, especially for ground-dwellers like amphibians that are helpful allies in pest control.

Earth-friendly gardening practices | In addition to shaping the landscape, how you maintain it is critically important. If you attract wildlife but then pollute the space, then you jeopardize their well-being by harming them directly or by removing or poisoning their food source. So avoiding pesticides is key here. You can work with nature by composting and using compost, mulching some garden beds and allowing fallen leaves to be used, minimizing lawn and minimally watering the garden as a whole.

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CHOOSING WILDLIFE-FRIENDLY PLANTS

When choosing plants, there are some very important points to keep in mind that make all the difference in the garden's ability to be truly beneficial to our local and migratory wildlife.



Regionally native plants | Plants that have coevolved with our wildlife over multiple centuries are their perfect food. In fact, some animal species need certain plant species for food to survive. The Karner Blue Butterfly, for example, is no longer found in Canada due to the loss of their only food source, lupines, from its native region in southern Ontario.

Native plants also typically have the right nutrients for animals. One study showed that native shrubs produced fruit with the right amount of fat and sugar for migrating and overwintering birds while the non-native species did not.

This also applies to insects and the leaves they need, such as butterfly caterpillars. For instance, the Norway Maple is a non-native plant that few insects visit. A good thing, you might think, except that we need insects and the functions they perform. Birds also need insects to feed their young, and often themselves, too. As a result, birds generally avoid Norway Maples.



Diverse plants | Include a diversity of plants with different flower colours, shapes, sizes and bloom times to support the many pollinators and their varied feeding habits and lifecycles. Where possible include a variety of plant types to provide layers and differing food and shelter sources.



Invasive plants | Non-native plants that can spread quickly in natural areas pose a significant concern to our ecosystems. The Norway Maple (as mentioned above) has been used in municipal and residential planting but can be harmful to our ecosystems when seeds travel to natural areas and outcompete our native trees. This also eliminates many of the wildflowers that would grow on the woodland floor, as the Norway Maple's roots are dense and shallow and can make it difficult for other plants to get established. Some people mean well thinking they are buying a native Red Maple when in fact it is often a red cultivar of the Norway Maple. So it's important that we become aware of what we are buying, planting and introducing to our garden and local ecosystem.



Neonics | Neonicotinoids are pesticides that can stay in the plant from the time a seed has been treated to when the plant produces nectar and pollen to fruit or seeds. This means that pollinators and birds who feed on these plant parts, as well as any other insects that may try to eat their leaves, are seriously harmed or killed. CWF has a line of neonic-free plants sold at participating stores in the spring. Check our list of resources below for details.



Over cultivated plants | Some plants have been cultivated to the extent that their less showy fertile parts have been replaced with showy sterile flowers. Choose plants that are their original form when possible and keep any sterile favourites to a minimum.

Remember to visit CanadianWildlifeFederation.ca/Gardening for information, tools and events.