



# Extension FactSheet

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## Backyard Enhancement for Wildlife

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**L**oss of habitat is a major threat to wildlife around the world. Although parks and nature preserves can provide excellent habitat to support wildlife populations, many parts of the eastern United States have relatively small amounts of public land. In Ohio, only 7% of the land is publicly owned. As a result, if wildlife populations are to be successfully conserved, we must provide habitat for them on private lands. Habitat restoration is especially critical in metropolitan areas, where development has eliminated most natural areas. As our landscapes become increasingly urbanized, fewer people have easy access to nature and wild animals. So providing backyard habitat for wildlife also is important for education and appreciation of nature.

If you have decided to manage your backyard in a way that is sensitive to wildlife needs, the first step is to decide which animals you wish to attract to your property. Are you most interested in providing habitat to migrating birds? Do you want frogs and salamanders to live near a backyard pond? Maybe a butterfly or hummingbird garden interests you? Whatever your interests and however small or large your backyard, you have the opportunity to attract wildlife.

The second step is to evaluate your yard from a wildlife perspective. Does it provide food, cover, or water to the group of animals that you want to attract? If not, what is lacking? In order to recognize important habitat components, you will need to learn about the habitat requirements of different animals. All animals need food, water, cover, and places to raise their young. Each species of wildlife requires a different mix of types and amounts of these habitat components. For example, birds like American Robin need trees or shrubs for nesting, whereas Eastern Bluebirds require cavities or nest boxes.

Here are some ways that you can make your backyard more attractive to wildlife:

### **Provide a water source.**

Water sources like birdbaths, small ponds, and dishes of water will attract wildlife. Running water is attractive to some animals, but try to conserve water whenever possible by offering more permanent water sources. Locating the water near shrubs, trees, or other cover will encourage animals to use those areas.

### **Choose native plant species whenever possible.**

“Native” refers to plants or animals that occur naturally in an area, rather than being introduced from elsewhere. For example, ornamental plants from other countries (like multiflora rose) are not native to Ohio. Within a region, native animals and plants have evolved together, so it is no surprise that native plants usually provide the best sources of food and cover to wildlife. For this reason, native plants generally support more species of wildlife than non-native plants. In addition, plants that are native to the soils and climate of Ohio will usually require less water, less fertilizer, and less effort to maintain.

### **Reduce the amount of lawn on your property.**

Turf grasses are of little value to wildlife and are ecologically expensive to maintain. Replace lawn with gardens, trees, shrubs, or meadows. In addition to attracting wildlife, reducing the area of your lawn will save you time and money on lawn care, increase your home’s energy efficiency, conserve water, reduce mower pollution, and decrease run-off of fertilizers and pesticides.

### **Reduce or eliminate the use of pesticides and herbicides.**

Insecticides, fungicides, and herbicides can reduce soil and water quality on your property and can directly harm animals. Whenever possible, use organic techniques for gardening or lawn care. Encourage natural control agents

### ***Alternatives to lawn***

- Native species as ground cover instead of grass (e.g., switch grass, big bluestem, Indian grass, broom sedge)
- Native trees or shrubs
- Butterfly or hummingbird garden
- Annual or perennial flower bed
- Hedgerow
- Meadow or prairie patch
- Organic vegetable garden
- Water garden or pond
- Rock garden
- Mulched path

such as ladybird beetles, some wasps, and birds. If you must use pesticides, avoid highly toxic or broad spectrum chemicals that kill most invertebrates.

### **Plant a variety of fruiting trees and shrubs.**

Fruiting plants are used by many wildlife species. They are especially important to birds during late summer and fall. For example, many migratory songbirds rely on fruits to meet their energetic requirements for migration. By offering a variety of fruiting plants, you will attract a wider variety of species. If possible, select plants that flower or fruit at different times during the season. This will ensure that some food is available to animals throughout the growing season.

### **Plant vines and shrubs in thickets or hedges for cover.**

Creating lush growth in a few places will simulate a natural environment. Wildlife, especially birds, prefer using areas of dense cover for nesting, perching, and escaping from predators. You can plant or grow vines and shrubs along your house or a fence. Another benefit from the cover is additional privacy in your backyard.

### **Create meandering habitat edges.**

Edges are where two kinds of habitats meet (such as shrubs and lawn). Abrupt edges occur where two very structurally different habitats intersect (such as a tall forest and a field), whereas at gradual edges the habitats grade into one another (like the transition from forest to saplings to shrubs to field). Meandering edges do not follow a straight line and, instead, are curved and irregular. Gradual and/or meandering edges are more structurally complex and are favored by most wildlife. You can create

these types of edges by planting shrubs or small trees along existing edges.

### **Leave wild (natural) corners of your gardens and yards.**

Even uncut lawn grasses such as fescue, bluegrass, and rye can provide meadow-like habitat to animals throughout the year. These natural corners add structural diversity to your backyard.

### **Create shelter for animals.**

Animals need safe places to hide from predators and to be protected from harsh weather. You can create simple shelters with log piles, stacks of firewood, and even stone walls. These types of cover are used by many small mammals (like chipmunks), reptiles, amphibians, and birds. If you have a more natural yard, dry leaves, twigs, and branches left standing or in a brushpile can also provide shelter and nesting sites for animals.

### **Retain dead trees or dead limbs whenever possible.**

Unless they are a threat to safety, you can leave dead trees or limbs for use by birds such as woodpeckers, nuthatches, chickadees, and titmice. Decaying trees and their cavities provide shelter, dens, nests, and foraging sites for many wildlife species. In Ohio, over 50 species of birds and mammals use tree cavities. Trees with fungal conks, dead branches, old scars, and soft or decaying wood (especially heartrot) are good indicators of cavity potential.

### **Plan ahead.**

Before you start digging and planting, have a plan for your backyard. Draw a map of your property showing existing structures and plants. You can use this to design what you want your backyard to look like.

### ***Examples of bird-friendly plants***

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|----------------|--------------------|
| • Oak          | • Red Cedar        |
| • Beech        | • Spruce           |
| • Hickory      | • Sumac            |
| • Mulberry     | • Viburnum         |
| • Dogwood      | • Wild Grapes      |
| • Redbud       | • Blackberry       |
| • Serviceberry | • Elderberry       |
| • Hawthorn     | • Virginia Creeper |
| • Witch hazel  | • Bittersweet      |

**Examples of flowers that attract birds and butterflies**

- Sunflowers
- Asters
- Daisies
- Black-eyed Susan
- Purple coneflower
- Butterfly weed
- Purple and white prairie clovers
- Goldenrods
- Blazing stars
- Phlox
- Beebalm
- Ironweed
- Jo-Pye weed
- Columbine

**Avoid having birds strike your windows.**

Although providing wildlife habitat in your backyard is an overall positive thing for animals, it may increase the number of bird strikes on your property. Birds sometimes strike windows because they don't see the glass. During nesting season, they sometimes see their reflection in the glass and want to drive the "intruder" out of their territory. Many species strike windows throughout the year, but especially during migration (spring and fall), when they don't see the glass in time. Studies estimate that millions of birds are killed due to collisions with windows each year. Placing sheer cloth or netting in front of the window breaks the reflection and the open-flight-path appearance but retains much use of the window. Taping crinkled plastic wrap onto the glass has a similar function. Another approach is to hang cloth or aluminum foil strips in front of the window, or to plant shrubs. Placing hawk or owl silhouettes in the window to frighten birds has only limited effectiveness. You can remove the covering when the bird changes behavior and is no longer a problem.

**What about your pets?**

If you are trying to attract wildlife to your property, reducing the presence or disturbance by pets is a good idea. Believe it or not, cats pose serious threats to songbirds and other native wildlife in many urban, suburban, and rural areas. Cats can kill adult birds and nestlings and often destroy the eggs and nests of many species. Recent studies estimate that free-ranging cats may kill over one billion birds each year in the United States, making cats among the greatest sources of mortality for songbirds. Keeping your cat indoors will not only prevent predation of wild birds but also will reduce unwanted cat reproduction and the spread of disease.

**Be aware that you may attract "nuisance" wildlife too.**

Whenever you provide habitat to "desirable" species, you may attract unwelcome animals too. Raccoons may raid garbage cans, squirrels may rob bird feeders, rabbits may eat garden vegetables, and woodpeckers may peck at your siding. Generally, the best solution is to exclude the animal from the problem area. Tight fitting and secured garbage can lids, squirrel or predator guards on bird feeders, and garden fences are all effective. Also, check around the house and close any holes or repair worn caulking, especially where service pipes or wires enter the house. As with all nuisance wildlife problems and damage concerns, changing your level of tolerance is the easiest solution. However, if you have a persistent problem, you can contact private wildlife control specialists, the Ohio Division of Wildlife, and USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services for technical advice and/or assistance.

**For more information:**

National Wildlife Federation ([www.nwf.org](http://www.nwf.org)) has a backyard wildlife habitat program that provides ideas, helpful advice, and national certification.

Ohio Department of Natural Resources—Division of Wildlife (1-800-WILDLIFE) also has a backyard wildlife habitat program.

Visit Ohio State University Extension's web site "Ohioline" at: <http://ohioline.osu.edu>