

Habitat Happenings

Cultivating Untidiness

Do some winter planning for summer wildscapes!

"How can I attract wildlife to my yard?" asked a friend recently. My answer: "Cultivate untidiness."

Untidiness does not mean littering your yard with old tires or trash; it means letting at least some of it go wild. The compunction to tidy and groom, whether spraying the lawn with pesticides, raking up leaf litter, or pruning shrubs and trees to rigid shapes, is not friendly to wildlife.

Biologists talk about diversity in terms of both species diversity, the number and kind of species found in a particular area, as well as structural diversity, the form of the community.

A typical yard with lawn, raked flower beds, and specimen shade trees is not diverse by either measurement. It may be tidy, but it provides habitat for very few native species.

Wildscaping, on the other hand, growing a variety of native or adapted plants in a natural arrangement that includes diverse shapes, colors, flowers, and fruits, is a boon to wildlife.



Once grass - now low-water blooms. © Bob Johnson

One easy way is to start small: choose an area of lawn to replace with a mix of native shrubs, perennial flowers, and wild grasses. By selecting plants that provide different heights and forms, foliage, and flowers with varying blooming times that provide an assortment of fruits and seeds, you'll add interest - both human and wild - year round.

A “wild” garden doesn’t have to look sloppy: Arrange the plants to enhance the space they’ll occupy, considering their eventual shape, size, and habit of growth and bloom.

Cluster plants for maximum impact by grouping three or five plants of the same species. Placing clusters to contrast colors, foliage, and blooming time can be pleasing.

Magenta poppy mallows, for example, open in mid-morning, and close at night, while yellow Missouri evening primrose does the opposite, unfurling its petals in the evening to bloom until wilted by the next day’s sun.



Purple mallow & Mexican hat by Bob Johnson



Primrose by Stephen Jones

The airy flower heads of Indian ricegrass float in front of the sturdy, upright stems of rubber rabbitbrush; ricegrass blooms in spring, rabbitbrush’s golden blossom heads appear in late summer and fall.

Flowers of different sorts in different seasons appeal to diverse kinds of pollinators, including native bees, butterflies, beetles, moths, and hummingbirds. Poppy mallows attract bees and flower flies; night-flying moths pollinate evening primroses.

Add structural diversity by mixing tall plants, mid-sized and shorter plants, and ground-hugging plants to allow wildlife to move from one part of the wildscape to another. Strips of plants running between different habitat areas allow small critters a corridor for safe travel.

Resist tidiness: leave organic litter in place to mulch the soil, don’t cut back dead stalks until spring to leave seeds for food, prune thoughtfully, and avoid using pesticides.

Mulch shades the soil, keeping it cool on hot summer days and warmer in winter. It holds moisture and decomposes to release nutrients that help plants grow.

Dead leaves may hide the cocoons of swallowtail butterflies; a dense shrub or tree provides camouflage and thermal protection for the tiny nests of hummingbirds.

If you have pest problems, start with the least invasive remedy. Most pesticides kill everything they encounter - even though fewer than one percent of North America’s animal, plant, and microbe species are considered pests.

Learn what’s a weed and what’s a native plant. The latter are important for their established relationships with wildlife and other plants; regardless of whether they suit our aesthetics or not, native plants are the backbone of wild communities.

Sagebrush, for example, is often called a weed. But this tough and fragrant native shrub is an integral part of western landscapes and is essential to the survival of many native species, including pronghorn, sage thrashers, and two species of sage-grouse.

Tumbleweed, on the other hand, is a true weed, an annual native to the steppes of central Asia that crowds out native species. Spotted knapweed and Canada thistle are also true weeds.

Cultivating untidiness takes practice, but it's worth the effort. As Ken Druse points out in *The Natural Habitat Garden*, if every one of America's estimated 38 million gardeners wildscaped just one-tenth of an acre, it would equal 3.8 million acres of wildlife habitat.

Imagine restoring and reconnecting to so much nature right at home.

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A wildscape oasis by Bob Johnson