

Garden for Wildlife



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We are in the midst of a biodiversity crisis. 45% of earth's insects are gone, North America has lost 1/3 of its total bird population (3 billion), and we've entered the sixth great extinction. Thankfully there is something we can do to help - we can change our gardening practices.

In his book, *Nature's Best Hope*, Dr. Doug Tallamy introduces a vision for a "Homegrown National Park" system where our yards serve as conservation corridors to support local wildlife and migrating birds.

Create your conservation space by following the guidelines summarized in this document. Then learn more and join the movement at HomegrownNationalPark.org.

PLANTS, DESIGN & HABITAT

Plant keystone natives

Native plants are great, but they aren't all equal. Keystone natives feed a larger variety of insects and birds. For example, an oak tree will support the caterpillars of **more than 200 species** of local moths and butterflies! For perennial plants, keystone natives in our area include asters, goldenrod, and perennial sunflowers. And don't forget keystone shrubs to support wildlife and suppress weeds.

To find the best natives to support wildlife, input your zip code at Audubon.org/PlantsForBirds. The local Grow Native website is helpful too - GrowNative.org. Buy from local nurseries and avoid plants that have been treated with neonicotinoids and other pesticides.

Develop caterpillar microhabitats

Caterpillars are key to the food web - they convert plants into vital nutrients for baby birds. Create microhabitats under native trees by planting native plants, maintaining loose soil, leaving leaf litter and adding additional leaf litter. Some caterpillars tunnel into soft wood to pupate, so add some decaying logs too. To learn more, search for microhabitats at Xerces.org.

Shrink your lawn

Work towards a goal to replace half of your lawn with native plants and shrubs. Think of your lawn as an area rug, not a wall-to-wall carpet.

Too much hardscape is hard

An overabundance of mulch, gravel or pavement reduces habitat and stormwater absorption. Consider filling in space with native shrubs that support wildlife while also suppressing weeds.

Avoid and remove invasive species

Invasive species crowd out the native plants our wildlife need to survive. Common examples of invasive species in our area are Callery Pear trees (like Bradford), Bush Honeysuckle, Burning Bush,

and Tree of Heaven. Familiarize yourself with invasive species so you can do your part by avoiding them and removing any in your yard. Learn more at [MOInvasives.org](https://www.moinvasives.org).

YOUR HOUSE

Eliminate unnecessary night lighting

Night lighting kills moths and other insects and can disorient migrating birds. If you can't eliminate the lighting, add a motion sensor to the fixture, lower the brightness, use yellow bulbs, and shield and aim the lights downward. Learn more at [DarkSky.org](https://www.darksky.org).

Install window well covers

Window well covers are an inexpensive and easy way to prevent the deaths of toads, frogs, and other small creatures who become trapped inside window wells and starve.

MAINTENANCE

Garden naturally

Don't use fertilizer or pesticide in your garden - even the organic varieties harm soil, water and pollinators. Leave natural leaf litter as mulch and add other organic matter to enhance the soil. You can also add your own organic matter by composting.

Don't spray for mosquitoes!

Mosquito spraying isn't very effective against mosquitoes and even the natural varieties **kill other insects in the process**. Mosquitoes are best controlled in the larval stage and it is cheap and easy. Search online for "Mosquito Bucket of Doom". Then amplify the results by recruiting your neighbors to install buckets too. Learn more about this important issue at [BeeCaturga.com](https://www.beecaturga.com) and [Xerces.org/pesticides](https://www.xerces.org/pesticides).

Embrace messier fall gardening

Keep your garden messier in the fall and winter. This practice helps provide seeds and shelter for birds and insects, including moth caterpillars, a significant source of food for baby birds.

Leave the stalks of grasses and wildflowers standing through the winter. As the leaves fall from the trees, leave them where they fall on plant beds, where they will provide shelter for moth cocoons and other overwintering creatures. Learn more at [WildOnes.org/leave-the-leaves](https://www.wildones.org/leave-the-leaves). In addition, leave dried stems and pieces of dead wood around the garden to support native bee populations. Check [Audubon.org](https://www.audubon.org) for more information on lightening up on cleaning up the fall garden.

Delay spring cleanup

During the first warm days of spring, we are tempted to get out into the yard and work. But leaf litter is still providing frost protection for both plants and invertebrates. Butterflies' chrysalides still cling to dried stems and twigs, waiting for the right time to emerge. Early enthusiastic cleanup can destroy pollinators still hiding in debris. Err on the side of caution and **delay cleanup until after Tax Day (mid-**
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April). Waiting until May is even better. If you must clean up early, pile the debris in a corner of your yard, so the insects can finish their life cycle. Learn more by searching for “spring cleanup” at [Xerces.org](https://xerces.org).

Don't blast leaves with leaf blowers

Leaf blowers destroy crucial insect habitat. Do minimum cleanup with a rake instead and remember not to clean up too early in the spring!

Avoid mowing in the evening

As dusk approaches, many nocturnal species leave their hiding places and are vulnerable to a mower blade or wheel. Mow less and avoid the evening.

SUPPORT NATIVE BEES, BIRDS, BATS & OPPOSUMS

Ground nesting bees

The U.S. has about 4,000 native bee species, and roughly 70% nest in the ground. Support them by leaving small areas of dry, sandy soil—ideally with a slight southern slope—undisturbed. Avoid mulch, foot traffic, fertilizers, and chemicals near these spots. Learn more at GNBee.org.

Carpenter/stem nesting bees

About 30% of native U.S. bees nest in perennial stems or wood. Hollow stems from plants like goldenrod, blackberry, giant ragweed, and native hydrangea provide nesting sites. To protect bees, be mindful of when and how you cut back perennials. The Xerces Society offers a visual guide at [Xerces.org/publications/brochures/save-the-stems](https://xerces.org/publications/brochures/save-the-stems).

Wood nesting bees

For wood nesting bees, leave some dead branches, stumps and logs in your garden.

Feed the bees

Bees need to eat, which means nectar and pollen from native plants. Incorporate natives into your garden including super natives that produce nectar for bees and butterflies. Learn more about native bees at author Nancy Lawson's website HumaneGardener.com.

Install bird feeders in clearings

Birds at feeders are extra vulnerable to a neighborhood cat, especially if there are shrubs or other vegetation nearby. Keep shrubs and taller vegetation 10' away from bird feeders.

Provide water

Add a water source to your yard with a bubbler for spring through fall and a heater in the winter. You'll attract more birds and help bees, squirrels and other creatures. Search water features at GardenForWildlife.com.

Provide dead wood shelter

If you have an unobtrusive location, add a brush pile to provide cover for birds, butterflies, and other overwintering creatures. The bigger the better, but even small piles are helpful. If you can do so safely, keep dead trees as snags. [LeafLimb.com](https://leaflimb.com) is a great resource for learning about the value of dead and dying trees and stumps.

Manage your cat

Outdoor cats are estimated to **kill over 2 billion birds yearly** in the US, along with even more small mammals. The result is a significant decrease in the food supply for birds of prey and their offspring. Cats should be indoors. If you won't do that, at least give the birds a chance by outfitting your cat with a collar from [BirdsBeSafe.com](https://birdsbesafe.com) or a bell.

Prevent bird strikes

Up to 1 billion birds are killed each year in the US by window collisions. Make sure you have coverings (blinds, shades) on all your windows, turn off interior lights when not in use, and add window treatments that follow the 2 x 2 rule. Treatments include stickers, or adding white dots or lines with a glass pen. Marks should be no more than 2" apart both horizontally & vertically. Learn more at [ABCBirds.org](https://abcbirds.org).

Support bats

Bats are important flying mammals that help pollinate plants and control insects, including large numbers of mosquitoes. Sadly, they are often misunderstood and harmed out of fear. You can support bats by installing a bat house, avoiding chemicals, reducing unnecessary outdoor lighting, and sharing accurate information with others. For bat house guidance and trusted vendors, visit [MerlinTuttle.org](https://merlincott.com).

Be kind to opossums

Our native Virginia Opossum is the only marsupial in North America. These **gentle, shy, and non-aggressive** creatures are helpful garden visitors. They eat snails, slugs, beetles, and sometimes small rodents, naturally reducing pests. They are opportunistic feeders but are not strong or destructive like raccoons. You can help them by placing a shallow bowl of clean water in your yard and leaving some areas slightly untidy with dense shrubs or shelter boxes for daytime hiding spots. Avoid using pesticides, herbicides, or other poisons.

In urban areas, **dogs and cats are the main threat to young opossums, especially at night**. Keep pets indoors after dark and leash dogs when outside. If you encounter an opossum, it may hiss or "play dead." This is a fear response, not aggression. Give it space and time to move on.

PLEASE SHARE

Help educate your community by sharing these tips on social media, talking to your neighbors, and sharing with neighborhood and homeowner associations.