

HOW TO CREATE AN ECO-GARDEN



What Defines a Garden?

A garden may be a small sensible plot or a grand display of majestic trees, sweeping lawns, and flower displays like a city's arboretum. Despite design and scale, they all have one thing in common: these spaces are teeming with life both visible and unseen.

We use these spaces to give our homes curb appeal, to grow our victory gardens, or to provide places of beauty and fragrance for relaxation and outdoor entertainment. Birds, insects, reptiles, and small mammals use them for food, shelter, and reproduction. Whether we notice or not, our gardens are sustaining a host of living things. Even our soil is alive with both beneficial microbes and fungi which help our plants grow vigorously and decomposers such as worms, ants, and pill bugs which break down organic waste. It is an active ecosystem!

One of the greatest pleasures is waking up to the cheerful sound of the birds and see the excited activity of the hummingbirds at the feeder outside my kitchen window while making coffee, and we can hardly wait to enjoy it while watching the foraging in the backyard!

The canopy of trees and my birdbath attract many visitors, but it is the selection of plants with their pollen, seeds, berries, and insects that will keep them returning day after day and season to season.

Consider the Wildlife

Next time you visit your nursery, think of the wildlife that depends on your choices.

If you like hummingbirds, for example, consider which plants attract them. These are often red and orange with fluted or bell-shaped flowers. Choose some berry-producing shrubs and seed-producing flowers for your songbirds. These will keep them around through the seasons.

Attract helpful butterflies and bees. Butterflies often like blues and purples. Bees like yellows but will visit most pollen-rich flowers. Good choices would include buddleia, hollyhock, lantana, verbena, gallardia, salvia, scabiosa, yarrow, hyssop, and alyssum.

Night-active moths prefer fragrant plants such as night-blooming jasmine, honeysuckle, nicotiana, brugmansia, and cereus. Herbs, including thyme, rosemary, borage, and lavender, are nice companions for flowers and help to encourage visits from active pollinators.

Encourage Nature's Food Chain

Adding a birdbath, toad house, or lizard habitat will help to keep your areas naturally pest-free. Toads like to rehydrate in shallow pools and saucers then retreat under logs, rocks, and low leafy plants. Lizards and skinks prefer warm surfaces for lounging such as rocks, concrete, and terra cotta. Keep these things tucked into garden beds and along borders. Mulches of leaf-litter and overhanging vines are perfect places for lizards to hide while feasting on the insects there. Take some time to research your native flora and fauna. Choose to attract your personal favorites.

Don't Be Too Tidy

Gardens are not meant to be flawless. They are places to witness the cycles of life. Be willing to sacrifice a bit of your personal Eden. Take off your glasses and step back. Do you really need to be concerned about perfect tidiness and stressed over chewed leaves and earwigs in your roses? The insects will bring hungry birds who will linger in search of tasty tidbits like tomato hornworms and other caterpillars. Finches love the tiny seeds in spent flower heads, and those they disperse will sprout next season. Fallen leaves create a natural mulch which attracts earthworms, conserves moisture and dissuades weeds. They also provide shelter for lizards and salamanders which eat garden pests.

Practice Integrated Pest Management

Instead of reaching for a pesticide, consider the balance of things and the natural food chain. Even organic insecticides like neem oil, pyrethrin, and spinosad which target specific bugs can cause a proliferation of others and should only be applied when bees are not active.

Always start with the least harmful deterrents such as water blasts, hand picking, diatomaceous earth, insecticidal soap, and sticky pheromone traps before moving on to harsher ones. Bio-controls are much better than insecticides. Praying mantis, ladybugs, parasitic wasps, and beneficial nematodes are all available for home delivery through tiptopbio.com.

Our gardens are resilient without human interference, and you will find that nature's food chain is quite efficient. We can help keep things in balance by making compost, using worm castings, reducing tillage, and using natural mulches to encourage decomposers and to keep soil microbes healthy. Great soil translates into vigorous plant growth.

Choose Suitable Plants

Wise plant selection is very important. Take note of plant size, water needs, and preferred sun exposure. Other factors might be pest resistance if you are plagued with deer, rabbits, mole, or gophers. "Trying to make it work" in less than optimum conditions will only lead to weak, pest-attracting specimens which will cost you time, money, and frustration. Plan ahead with wire barriers if root chewing animals are a problem, or remove turf in favor of native plants. Native varieties are clearly a wise approach to your landscape. They will attract and support native fauna and are most likely to thrive with little help. This means good value and more free time to enjoy relaxing in the garden.

Kids Learn by Observing

Grab a local nature guide book and learn to identify the new visitors you've attracted to your backyard. Our family has seen nearly 50 different varieties of birds in our yard this past year, some of them migratory species that come in winter and early spring.

What about squirrels, rats, and mice? What value do they have to the urban garden? In addition to being part of the food chain for snakes, hawks, and owls, they clean tree canopies of unpicked nuts and fruit, and their caches of seeds often help with propagation of trees and other plants. I enjoy squirrels for their energy and backyards antics. Their determination to outsmart me in getting to the bird feeder keeps me on my toes. Kids also benefit from watching wildlife and often develop a life-long appreciation of nature from early observation.

If you provide a haven, wildlife will come. In these times of disappearing bee colonies and butterfly populations, it is more important than ever that each of us do our part in attracting these pollinators to our gardens. Share time outdoors with your family, make some peanut butter/birdseed pinecones to hang, and learn some new facts.