

# Layering the Landscape for Wildlife Appeal

## **BENEFICIAL LANDSCAPES**

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With native habitats shrinking, our home landscapes are increasingly important for sustaining wildlife, including birds, amphibians, pollinators and other beneficial insects. In terms of year-round value, the backbone of wildlife habitat is our native trees and shrubs. Since they evolved along with native wildlife, they are most likely to be tied to their life cycles and most likely to adapt to changes in climate over time.

Almost all trees and shrubs provide some food and shelter for wildlife. Low-branching species that form thickets provide some of the best shelter, offering excellent nesting habitat and escape from predators. Thickets can be a little wild, but grouping them together and confining them to a defined area surrounded by mowed turf or prairie grass will make them more manageable.

The wider the range of vertical layers in the landscape—overstory trees, understory trees, large shrubs, smaller shrubs and herbaceous groundcovers—the more varied the habitat it offers. Structural diversity broadens the appeal for both mammals and birds. Fruiting trees and shrubs are an incredibly important food source for a variety of mammals and birds, and tend to provide the longest-lasting nourishment.

Fruiting trees and shrubs are also important to insect pollinators—bees, butterflies and beetles. Before setting fruit, these plants had to flower and their flowers had to be visited by pollinators in order for fruits to form. Early-blooming species such as plum, crabapple and juneberry are especially important to early season pollinators, particularly those that overwinter as adults. It's important to remember that prairie flowers and other garden perennials rarely start blooming before mid to late May, so flowering trees and shrubs are working overtime to sustain native pollinating insects early in the season.

Although there are well over 50 regionally native tree and shrub species that can be considered for a wildlife-friendly, layered landscape in eastern Nebraska, here are a few of our favorites:

Valuable large-growing trees include bur, red and chinkapin oak, bitternut hickory, walnut, pecan, hackberry, elm, sycamore, sugar maple, coffeetree and tulip tree. Mid-height and understory trees include redbud, ironwood, buckeye, hawthorn, crabapple, black cherry and hornbeam.

Large shrubs to consider are blackhaw and cranberrybush viburnum, American plum, grey dogwood, elderberry and buttonbush, to name a few. Medium and small shrubs include snowberry, coralberry, gooseberry, currant, redbud, dogwood, fragrant sumac and spicebush.

Finally, the bottom or ground-level layer of the wildlife friendly landscape should include a wide variety of native herbaceous plants—both woodland types in shaded zones and prairie types in sunny areas. Plants for sun include silphiums, asters, goldenrods, coneflowers, gayfeathers, mountain mint, big bluestem, Indiangrass, switchgrass and little bluestem for just a start. Shade-tolerant plants include a variety of sedges, bloodroot, columbine, boneset, snakeroot, bellflowers and many others.

With hundreds of native plant species to choose from, deciding which to choose can seem overwhelming but don't overthink it, as almost every native plant is beneficial to wildlife on some level.

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PHOTO: Native Juneberry bears blueberry-like fruits in June that are a favorite of birds as well as humans.

