

# Not for Us Only—The Value of Garden Wildlife

## **BENEFICIAL LANDSCAPES**

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More people are becoming aware of the importance of our home landscapes in helping to sustain wildlife. Natural habitat has shrunk dramatically across the globe in recent decades and our gardens can be refuges for a variety of creatures, many of which are struggling for survival.

Unless you live in the country or on an acreage, we're not talking about large animals like deer and turkey. We're also not talking about those abundant and often annoying animals that are right at home in and around a city such as skunks, rabbits, raccoons, opossums and squirrels. Instead we're talking about the myriad of charismatic creatures like birds, frogs, pollinating insects and other beneficial insects that are not only important for ecological function but which also enrich us with their varied shapes, colors, actions and sounds. These are the wildlife that help make our gardens come alive and which entertain us year-round.

Of all the animals that come to our gardens, none may be more important to us than birds. The list of benefits that birds provide is quite extensive—ranging from pollination, to seed dispersal, to cleaning up dead animals. And birds are critical to keeping insect populations in check, including some of the more annoying insects like mosquitos, ticks and gnats. But best of all, birds are beautiful. With just a little planting effort (and some well-placed feeders), a home garden could be visited by more than 50 species of colorful birds like cardinals, goldfinches, juncos, cedar waxwings, nuthatches, chickadees, various sparrows, woodpeckers, brown creepers and orioles to name just a few. It's no surprise that many plant enthusiasts also become bird enthusiasts.

Second to birds, beneficial insects are also important to the landscape and chief among these are the pollinators. It's impossible to ignore recent issues concerning two of the most popular pollinators: the monarch butterfly and the honeybee. By planting a wide variety of flowering plants, chosen to bloom throughout the growing season, and by including food plants for larval stages, we can attract a staggering variety of pollinating insects to the garden: charismatic butterflies such as swallowtails, mourning cloaks, commas, red admirals, painted ladies, sulphurs and red-spotted purples. Including milkweed will help sustain monarchs and planting clover species will help sustain fritillaries.

Many insects and arthropods that aren't nearly as gregarious as butterflies are no less important. These are the predatory species and nutrient recyclers that help plants grow and that help sustain ecological balance. Soldier beetles, lady bugs, lacewings, assassin bugs, tachinid flies, dung beetles, various wasps, mantids, ground beetles, spiders and earthworms are just a few species to be celebrated in the garden. Generally speaking, the more layered and plant diverse a landscape is, the more insect diverse it will also be.

Two unsung animal heroes of the landscape that should be celebrated more are bats and snakes (and other reptiles). Unfortunately we've associated these creatures with rabies and poisonous venom. True, some snakes are poisonous and some bats can be rabid, but the vast majority of both are much more beneficial than harmful. Keep in mind that a single bat can eat hundreds if not thousands of mosquitoes and mosquito-sized insects in a night. And snakes are important for keeping rodent populations and ground level insects in check.

Spread the word that biodiversity is important in the planted landscape as it is in the natural landscape and that we can all do our part to help attract a much wider diversity of wildlife to our own home landscapes. In later articles we'll take a closer look at some of the most important native trees and shrubs we can plant to attract and sustain beneficial wildlife.

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PHOTO of cedar waxwing in April.

