

Welcome in the Wild Things

by

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In a February column, I discussed the necessity of developing a step-wise garden plan. I stated that I would return to that topic at intervals to inform you of our progress in creating a new flower garden. To be honest, my husband and I are way behind. We have cleared and tilled one large bed and have removed most of the plants we plan to keep.

The garden looks pretty sad right now, and so did one lonely bumblebee last Friday. My husband left a few phlox plants until just before tilling, so the little fellow could have a few more sips of nectar before we had to shoo him away.

The lone bumblebee stayed in my mind all weekend. I thought about the serviceberry tree we had to remove last winter. The berries had provided food and the branches and leaves shelter for cardinals, finches, hummingbirds, and others. The boxwood hedge was a nesting area for thrashers. Toads often rested in the soil beneath the lowest branches of the boxwoods. The flowers and herbs provided food and nectar for caterpillars, butterflies, and bees. The garden was an unplanned wildlife habitat for many years, and my husband and I thought little about the garden's importance as a safe haven.

The bumblebee led me to the internet and articles about creating a wildlife habitat that will welcome animals, birds, butterflies, bees, and other pollinating insects. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-070 offers basic information and contains an extensive list of publications, habitat web links, and links to sites about wildlife pests. VCE Publication HORT-59NP covers creating habitats for birds, butterflies, and bees.

The four basic components of a successful wildlife habitat are ample food, clean water, cover or shelter for protection, and space for territorial wildlife to mark their boundaries. Most property owners can provide these four necessities, even on a small scale in a suburban neighborhood.

Benefits to the homeowner include increased property value because of attractive plantings; improved soil, air, and water quality; and better insect pest control, leading to decreased use of chemicals that harm the environment.

There are disadvantages to developing a wildlife habitat. The presence of small furry and feathered prey will attract predators. Hawks, owls, and foxes, while magnificent to watch, can decimate a rabbit and songbird population. Coyotes are generally unwelcome wherever they roam. Raccoons, opossums, and skunks can be annoying and, like other wild mammals, can carry rabies. Deer and rabbits commonly invade our yards and fields. Most snakes in our area are non-poisonous and will help to keep down the rodent population. Free-roaming feral and pet cats account for the loss of billions of songbirds in the United States each year. As a long-time cat

owner, I have to say that cats live longer, healthier lives if they are kept inside. Dogs, too, will prey on small animals, and should not be allowed to roam.

If you decide to create a habitat, you will need to develop a plan that will help you achieve your specific goals for attracting new species, while maintaining a pleasant landscape. Diversity of plantings is necessary to provide both food and shelter for various species. Native plants are recommended, as they require less watering and are more disease and pest resistant than exotic species. VCE Publication HORT-59NP contains charts of plants attractive to butterflies and hummingbirds. Non-living materials, such as stone walls, rock piles, and nesting boxes will encourage a variety of animals to take shelter on your property. *Bringing Nature Home* by Douglas W. Tallamy is an invaluable resource for anyone thinking about creating a wildlife habitat. The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries offers an educational outreach program called Habitat at Home©. Virginia residents can apply for a wildlife habitat certificate at <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/>

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