

# FIT FOR MAN AND BEAST

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Column: Diggin' In

Native plant expert **Jan Newton** has been creating [a native plant habitat garden at Stonehouse Elementary School](#) in James City County. It's now been certified by the National Wildlife Federation.

A monarch butterfly pupa hangs under a leaf in the garden.

**Summary:** A certified wildlife habitat is not only beautiful, it gives critters a home.

**Jan Newton** used to spend her time with ballet and modern dance. When her knees wore out, she delved into native plants.

"Now I have fun digging instead of jumping," says the Williamsburg resident and member of the John Clayton Chapter, Virginia Native Plant Society.

Lately, her digging has been in the form of a 5,900-square-foot habitat garden with more than 70 species of native plants at Stonehouse Elementary School in James City County. The National Wildlife Federation recently approved the space as a certified habitat garden.

"With so much development destroying natural habitats, planting a native, wildlife habit is not only beneficial to wildlife, but it's become a necessity," says **Jan**.

"Creating a wildlife habitat with beautiful flowers, fruits, berries and leaf shapes also brings enjoyment to humans. You also enjoy watching the wildlife that visits and lives there."

**Jan** says it's easy and beneficial to create your own habitat garden at home and shares these tips on how to make it happen:

Best fall-blooming plants for a home garden?

**Brown-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia triloba*)**. I love brown-eyed Susans because their shape is nice, compact and round and, being perennials, they come back year after year. They bloom summer into fall with golden yellow petals with brownish- black centers. Butterflies like them and birds eat their seeds. They grow to 2 to 3 1/2 feet tall and prefer sun to part sun with average soil and drainage. They are easily grown from seed.

**Joe-Pye weed (*Eupatorium fistulosum*)**. Joe-pye weed is a magnet for butterflies and, if planted near a milkweed plant, monarch caterpillars will often make their chrysalises on the undersides of its leaves. It is a sturdy plant that forms a clump around 3 to 5 feet wide and reaches 3 to 6 feet in height. Joe-Pye weed has pink to pale lavender clusters of flowers July to September and prefers full sun, rich soil and moist drainage, but tolerates part sun, clay soil and average drainage.

**Coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*)**. Hummingbirds like coral honeysuckle nectar and birds adore the fruits which come in the form of red berries that start in August and last into March. Coral honeysuckle, also called trumpet honeysuckle, is a vine that grows to 15 feet and produces coral to red trumpet- shaped flowers with yellow centers April through October. It grows in sun to part-sun, average to moist drainage and in, basically, any soil. Coral honeysuckle's leaves are semi-

evergreen. This vine is not invasive or aggressive like the Japanese honeysuckle vine (*L. japonica*) that most people are familiar with.

**Green-headed coneflower (*Rudbeckia laciniata*)**. From summer to fall green-headed coneflowers produce bright yellow flowers with green centers. The flowers are quite showy as they can be up to 5 inches across in size. The coneflowers grow 2 to 10 feet tall and love full sun and moist soil, but often tolerate dryer soil. Butterflies and birds like this plant and it doesn't need deadheading to keep it blooming.

**New York ironweed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*)**. Butterflies are often seen on the purple flowers of New York ironweed August to September and sometimes in October. New York ironweed has sturdy stems and reaches 3 1/2 to 8 feet tall. It prefers full sun and moist soil, but does fine in part-sun and average soil.

**Boltonia or false aster (*Boltonia asteroides*)**. It grows to 2 to 6 feet tall (ours grew to 5 feet its first year!) and offers delicate and wispy leaves with dainty, small daisy-like white (can be pink or lavender) flowers with yellow centers; bloom time is early fall to frost. Boltonia requires full sun, moist to dry drainage and tolerates dry summers and wet winters. Butterflies like the nectar.

Tips for making a habitat garden function properly?

Use native plants. Add compost to improve poor soil. Select plants for a variety of food sources - flowers, seeds, berries, fruits, nuts, leaves and stems. Consider evergreens and plants with berries for winter interest, food and shelter. Group plants according to their light, moisture and soil requirements. Place plants so they have room to reach maturity.

In summer, fall-blooming plants often get leggy, so cut them back about one-third to half their height around July 4 they stay shorter and bloom later. I usually cut back only half of these particular plants, leaving half to bloom as normal. Doing this extends bloom time in your garden and allows wildlife to have nectar and seeds for a longer time period.

Also, stepping stones make a garden inviting, so place some of those where you want them.

How does the school use the garden?

It's an outdoor classroom that teaches lessons in habitat, soil, native plants, life cycles, conservation and other Standards of Learning subjects.

Things to know

What does a certified habitat garden need? Food, water, shelter and nesting places.

How do you get a habitat certified? Through the National Wildlife Federation at [www.nwf.org](http://www.nwf.org)

Want to see the habitat garden at Stonehouse? Visit the site during non-school hours (after 3:15 p.m. weekdays or all day weekends) at 3651 Rochambeau Drive at Toano in James City County; for a guided tour, contact **Jan Newton** at 757-566-3646.