

Sustainable Landscaping: Creating Wildlife Habitat with Native Species

When thinking about plants for your garden consider going native! By being mindful of your plant choices you can create a sustainable landscape in your backyard which is easy to maintain, uses less water, and creates habitat for local wildlife.

Benefits of Native Plants

Plants which are native to the Sonoran Desert have had hundreds and hundreds of years to adapt to the region. The Sonoran Desert is an area which experiences very little rainfall along with other growing challenges, such as extreme summer heat, intense sunlight, and soils low in organic matter. Choose plant species that have adapted to these conditions and they will thrive! Once established these plants will require little maintenance and little to no supplemental water, and are less susceptible to disease and insect problems.

Choosing native plants does not mean that you are limiting your choices. We are lucky in the Sonoran Desert to have very mild winters which allows for a high diversity of trees, shrubs, cacti, succulents, groundcovers, and wildflowers.

Plant Native Trees

Planting native trees on your property is a low cost way to help cool your home and yard. Planting trees on the north, east, and west sides of your property will help to passively cool your home in the hot summer months. Leave the south side of your home free of trees, in order to allow sunlight to passively heat your home in the winter months. Native trees, once established, should only require supplemental water in times of severe drought. An added benefit to planting native trees is the habitat you will create for birds and other wildlife. Besides the benefits listed above, planting trees helps clean the air by reducing CO₂ and helps reduce erosion as the trees' root systems grow and spread.

Four Essential Elements to Attract Wildlife

Planting certain natives will attract wildlife into your landscape such as beneficial insects, birds, butterflies, lizards, and toads! To attract wildlife into your garden, you need to provide the following essential elements: water, food, shelter, and nesting sites.

Water – Birds will use water found in your yard not only for drinking but also for bathing. Therefore it is important the water remain clean, as this will help prevent the spread of disease. Water elements such as fountains and waterfalls may attract birds more frequently because of the sound, and they stay clean longer due to their constant movement. If using a bird bath or another standing water source, you should change the water every few days so it remains clean.

Food – The more variety of plants in your yard, the more variety of wildlife you'll attract. In striving for a well-kept yard, we often eliminate the elements that are essential for providing food

for wildlife. Pruning your plants too much eliminates flowers and seeds which are an important food source. Using gravel makes finding seeds and insects difficult for birds. Instead of using gravel, try using organic mulch and groundcovers which create food sources for wildlife. Also refrain from using pesticides which kill many insects that are an important food source.

Shelter & Nesting – Provide habitat for native species by having a diverse variety of species planted in various groupings and levels. Plant a combination of trees, shrubs, and groundcovers to provide various heights for your landscape. Low-lying branches, vines, rock piles, dead tree limbs, and brush piles can provide essential shelter for wildlife. Cats and dogs are often predators of urban wildlife. Consider keeping your pets indoors, or finding other ways to reduce their ability to attack wildlife, such as using bells on their collar.

Creating Native Gardens to attract Birds and Butterflies

Birds – Birds have a wide variety of eating habits, from insects and seeds to fruit, so the more varieties of plants in your yard the better.

Birds that are seed eaters will benefit from trees like Mesquite, Ironwood, and Palo Verde. These trees will attract birds like Finches, Quail, Doves, and Sparrows. Many shrubs, such as Desert Hackberry, Fairy Dusters, and Hopbush, will attract these birds as well. Fruit and berry eating birds are attracted to many varieties of Prickly Pear cacti and Mexican Elderberry trees which can grow upwards of 30ft tall!

Hummingbirds are attracted to the nectar of plants which have tubular shaped flowers like Aloe, Salvia, and Ocotillo.

Butterflies - Butterflies are not too picky about where they get their nectar, but there are some common varieties which they tend to be especially attracted to, such as Lantana, Verbena, Milkweed, and Passionvine. Certain plants are also known as “host plants,” a plant where butterflies will deposit their larvae. Milkweed is a great choice for a host plant as it will especially attract the Queen Butterfly species (typically in flight spring though fall). Passionvine, another host plant, will attract the Gulf Fritillary Butterfly, common in the desert southwest.

Just remember the more native species you plant, the less water you will have to supply, the lower your cooling bill will be in the hot months, and the more wildlife you will get to enjoy!

Resources

1. Cromell, Cathy, Miller, Jo, and Bradley, Lucy K. *Earth-Friendly Desert Gardening!* (University of Arizona and Maricopa County, Arizona: Arizona Master Gardeners Press, 2003)
2. Lancaster, Brad. *Rainwater Harvesting for Drylands*, (Tucson, Arizona: Rainsource Press, 2006).
3. Mielke Judy, *Native Plants for Southwestern Landscapes*, (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, Pennsylvania: 1993).