



Wildlife Habitat

Jim and Teresa Gallion, Special to News Post

How your own garden can become a refuge for local wildlife, and for you.

We live in chaotic times. Some days it seems that the world has gone absolutely bonkers! But one thing remains the same during times of upheaval: Nature offers us a peaceful refuge. When I talk to fellow gardeners and native plant enthusiasts, it is clear that they rely upon the natural world as a source of optimism and serenity in difficult times, just as my wife Teresa and I do. Teresa and I will often seek our garden's soothing sights and sounds for relief of stress—the birds chirping and frogs croaking, waters falling into our pond and the beautiful blooms of native plants that attract butterflies and other pollinators.

We often hear people speak of their desires to simplify their lives and focus on what is truly important. One thing that is increasingly important is our connection to nature. Perhaps this explains the increased interest in the use of native plants for conservation-based landscaping or habitat gardens. We plant native plants not only for our enjoyment, but also for the butterflies, birds and all forms of wildlife that will be attracted to the plants. This connection to the natural world provides us with a sense of being a part of the larger, wonderful world of nature with all its sounds and beauty right in our own backyard.

Here in Frederick County, from the forests to the valleys, streams and rivers, farm fields and meadows, plant communities are made up of hundreds of species carpeting wild places. These plant communities transform energy from the sun and nutrients from the soil into food for themselves and wildlife. They also provide wildlife with cover and places to raise their young and sources of clean water. These diverse plant communities are the foundation of all ecosystems—including your yard.

Native plants are plants that occur naturally within a region or ecosystem without human intervention. Regionally native plants are the best choice for habitat gardens. The life cycles of plants and animals in each region of the world have evolved to complement each other. There are many examples of this kind of co-evolution: migratory wildlife travel between ranges at the time of year when their plant and animal food sources are producing the most food; wildlife species have developed hibernation behaviors that coincide with plant dormancy; and plants offer blooms that take advantage of the life cycle and physical shape of their wildlife pollinators.

As human populations have increased and expanded, we have removed the native plant communities in the regions we inhabited and have replaced them with plant species from other parts of the world. Non-native or exotic plants are plants that have been introduced,

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through human activity, to areas where they would not naturally have grown. Many of these plants have escaped our gardens, landscapes and farms and have invaded natural areas. Invasive plants are non-native plants that out-compete native plants, spread rampantly and alter our natural ecosystem. Often a small number of these introduced invasive species will replace entire native plant communities. The result is habitat destruction for the wildlife species that depend on native plants. Removal of our native plant communities is one of the reasons that habitat loss is the number one threat to wildlife today.

Take some time this spring to re-evaluate your gardening and landscaping practices. Think about reducing your turf and creating or restoring a habitat garden. Whole communities have been involved in habitat gardening and there is help out there to get you started. You will be helping our wildlife friends and find great enjoyment watching them! To learn more about some great programs to help you, check out these websites: The National Wildlife Federation at www.nwf.org , Wildones Natural Landscapers at www.for-wild.org , Monarch Watch at www.monarchwatch.org , the Maryland Native Plant Society at www.mdflora.org and Wildlife Gardening Adventures at www.gardeningadventures.com

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, 301- 600-1596, or visit <http://www.frederick.umd.edu/>. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.

