



Habitat Gardens in the Urban Landscape

By John Hoover, *Prime Landscape Services*

Although there are many styles and tastes in landscape gardening, many of us use our gardens to reconnect with nature. Landscaping to provide forage and shelter for wildlife can be simple and attractive, adding new interest to your gardens and enhancing your connection with the natural world. Creating habitat contributes to wildlife conservation, and incorporating native and well adapted plants can save you money when compared to the water, fertilizer and maintenance required to keep a nice lawn and a bed of begonias. In fact, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department even promotes habitat gardening through their Texas Wildscapes program. (www.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/wildscapes/)

Begin your plan by deciding what wildlife you want to attract. Songbirds, hummingbirds and butterflies are high on most people's lists and certainly add a great deal of entertainment. Dragonflies and damselflies are colorful visitors, and help to control mosquitoes. Toads and frogs are also in need of safe haven, and their singing at night can transport your backyard into the Louisiana bayous! Bats and other mammals may also visit, so of course you may need to



decide what is acceptable to your lifestyle and neighborhood. By creating habitat for one animal you often find others will use it. You should also investigate code, deed, and other legal restrictions to make sure your landscape modifications do not conflict with any local ordinances or rules. And of course you should research or seek the advice of a landscape professional to select the best plants for your situation.

The key elements of habitat gardens are shelter, forage, and water. All these elements can easily be attained using basic landscape design concepts and the right plants. Putting out feeders is acceptable and can help you concentrate activity in a focal point, but feeders can only supplement natural vegetation, not replace it. Birds, animals and insects feed and seek shelter in a variety of structures and at varying levels. Your plantings should reflect this diversity. Let's start at the top and work our way down, looking at some plant species that will accomplish these goals in an attractive landscape setting.



Not every urban lot is blessed with large trees, but our oaks, elms, pecans, and other hardy trees form the upper canopy. All trees provide structure



feet deep with steep sides, and shelter such as fish caves can protect your fish from most predators except the dreaded heron. Ponds also give you the opportunity to grow a greater diversity of plants with aquatic and bog plants. Amphibian populations have been in decline for years now due to habitat loss and pollution. A pond will most assuredly provide some refuge for toads, frogs, and possibly turtles. And snakes? Well, most people don't invite snakes, but they may show up occasionally. Most snakes are beneficial and harmless to humans, and most will never let you see them, but nature happens. It is rare to find anything more than a garter snake around most ponds unless you are close to a lake or river. In any case, this is really a very minor consideration in the grand scheme of things.



for nesting, shade for resting, and many provide forage in the form of acorns and nuts. Mid-level trees and large shrubs are where more of the noticeable action takes place, and offer some of the best variety of cover and forage. Excellent understory or mid-level trees include natives such as wax myrtle, Mexican plum, redbud, Eve's necklace, desert willow, dogwood, yaupon holly, deciduous yaupon (possumhaw), and other non-native hollies such as Fosters, Savannah, and Nellie R. Stevens. Shrubs, both deciduous and evergreen can form several layers. Shrubs of merit include many of the hollies, Burford,

needlepoint, dwarf yaupon, etc., American beautyberry, flameleaf and evergreen sumac, dwarf wax myrtle, Texas sage, greencloud sage, white honeysuckle bush, winter jasmine, yuccas, and nandinas. Close to the ground, good habitat includes grasses, groundcovers, open areas of mulch, and small brush piles. Wrens and rabbits love brush piles! Finally, include lots of flowering perennials and shrubs for both your enjoyment and to attract hummingbirds and butterflies. The list of great perennials for our area is long, but some stand-outs include Gregg salvia, Mexican bush sage, Turk's cap, pavonia, datura, butterfly weed, and ruellias.

Shrubs, both deciduous and evergreen can form several layers. Shrubs of merit include many of the hollies, Burford, needlepoint, dwarf yaupon, etc., American beautyberry, flameleaf and evergreen sumac, dwarf wax myrtle, Texas sage, greencloud sage, white honeysuckle bush, winter jasmine, yuccas, and nandinas. Close to the ground, good habitat includes grasses, groundcovers, open areas of mulch, and small brush piles. Wrens and rabbits love brush piles! Finally, include lots of flowering perennials and shrubs for both your enjoyment and to attract hummingbirds and butterflies. The list of great perennials for our area is long, but some stand-outs include Gregg salvia, Mexican bush sage, Turk's cap, pavonia, datura, butterfly weed, and ruellias.

In our personal experience, we have had a pond for thirteen years, lots of wild planting areas, and a small thicket with a brush pile. We have a nice mix, but we aren't wild enough yet! Our common guests include squirrels, raccoons, possums, owls, raptors, frogs, toads, lizards, and a wide variety of birds. We have never lost a fish or other pet to predators except for one visit from an egret. We did notice that our bullfrogs disappeared during the year that a pair of screech owls nested in the yard, but again, nature happens!

Going wild in your yard can truly be a rewarding experience with a positive impact on the environment. Think about what you might do to preserve some sanctuary for a few of our wild friends.

Water is the element that brings everything together. There are so many ways to bring water into your setting; simple birdbaths, bubbling boulders, or statuary fountains are options, but a water garden is truly the crowning touch in any garden. The sound of cascading water will summon visitors of all types. If you build it, they will come! Dragonflies, toads, frogs, birds and four legged friends will soon be stopping in, particularly during hot dry summers like the last two we had here in north Texas. What about my fish, you might ask? In a well constructed pond, you can safely keep your ornamental fish even if raccoons come to visit. An area 2-3

