

Water Gardens and Wildlife



By Bonnie
Bradshaw

A water garden is an irresistible attraction for wildlife. If you build one, they will come. When they arrive, will they be welcomed as guests or despised as pests?

Backyard ponds provide sorely needed resources for native animals whose wetland habitats have been eliminated by urban development. Birds, insects, mammals, reptiles and amphibians are drawn from miles around to a water garden.

The reception that wildlife receives often varies dramatically according to the species. Many people are delighted when songbirds visit their backyard pond, but they may have a very different reaction if they discover a snake slithering into the water. Here are a few suggestions to minimize wildlife problems:

Fish or no fish?

The decision whether or not to have fish in your backyard pond has several ramifications. Because they quickly devour amphibian eggs and insect larva in the water, fish will decrease your chances of attracting frogs, salamanders and dragonflies.

At the other end of the food chain, fish in a backyard pond can be easy prey for snakes, herons and raccoons. Another consideration is that fish produce large amounts of waste material which can turn your water garden into an outdoor fish tank that requires extra maintenance to keep clean.

If you decide to have fish in your pond, here are four ways to provide them with some protection from predators:

- 1. In the water, stack rocks or other objects under which the fish can hide.
- 2. Cover the pond with netting.
- 3. Place a statue of a heron next to the water. Because herons are territorial, this may encourage herons flying overhead to look for a meal elsewhere.
- 4. Install a Contech ScareCrow® in your yard. This motion-activated sprinkler instantly releases a short but startling burst of water when it detects an animal within 30 feet. Available online at www.scamat.com, the ScareCrow is an excellent deterrent for raccoons and herons.

If you decide not to have fish in your pond, consider adding “beach-side property.” Using a flexible pond liner to create a shallow gradation allows turtles, frogs and salamanders to easily get in and out of the water. Birds and butterflies will flock to the shallow water to bathe and mud-puddle.

Most importantly, a beach will prevent wildlife drownings. If a pond has steep sides, cottontail rabbits and other small animals can fall in while attempting to drink and be unable to get out.



Snakes: Friends or Foes?

Snakes play an important role in maintaining a healthy ecosystem. In areas where snakes have been eradicated, there often are large increases in rodent problems.

More than 15 species of aquatic snakes are native to North America. Only one of them is venomous – the cottonmouth. Snakes seen in and around backyard ponds are much more likely to be non-venomous species.

The Environmental Protection Agency has approved only one product as a snake repellent. This product contains a combination of naphthalene and sulfur. The label states that it is toxic to fish and should not be used near ponds, streams, pools or water supplies.

A better way to discourage snakes from taking up residence in your yard is to remove piles of brush, rocks, wood or other debris that provide likely hiding places for snakes and their prey. Any pet food or birdseed left outside that attracts insects and rodents may also attract snakes.

Many people are unaware that opossums consume large numbers of snakes, including venomous ones. Opossums are unaffected by the venom of cottonmouths, rattlesnakes and copperheads. So if you fear snakes, you should welcome opossums in your yard.

Snake Myths

“Snakes dig holes and burrow in backyards.” Snakes are physically unable to dig holes, but do use existing holes of small rodents for shelter and food.

“A snake in the yard is a danger to children and pets.” Snakes generally avoid encounters with humans and pets. Unless threatened, snakes will not attack animals too large to be considered a meal.

Masked Bandits

In many suburban neighborhoods, there are up to 10 times more raccoons per acre than in rural areas. It's ironic that as urban sprawl destroys large areas of habitat for most animals, it creates homes for a few adaptable species such as raccoons.

Around human dwellings, raccoons find plentiful food and an abundance of den sites. Fish in backyard ponds, bowls of pet food left on back porches, seed spilled on the ground below bird feeders, compost bins and unsecured garbage provide an endless buffet.

Contrary to what many people think, live trapping is neither a humane nor an effective way to solve raccoon problems.

Homeowners and pest control companies frequently use live traps to capture raccoons.

These animals often are lactating females. A few days after the captured animal has been euthanized or relocated far away, homeowners may hear the cries of hungry orphans or smell the odor of dead animals in their attic or under their deck.



The diamondback water snake is very common in North Texas. It's non-venomous, but many people kill them because they mistakenly think it's a cottonmouth.



Even in cases where the animal isn't a lactating female, live trapping usually results in suffering and death. Relocated animals rarely survive more than two weeks in an unfamiliar territory. They're unable to successfully compete for food and shelter with the existing population of wildlife in that area. Disoriented and seen as an invader, the relocated animal usually dies of starvation or from injuries inflicted by other wildlife.



In addition to being inhumane, live trapping also is ineffective. Nature hates a vacuum. If one animal is removed, another from the surrounding area soon takes its place.

So if raccoons have discovered there are fish in your water garden, the best solutions are to put netting over the pond or install a ScareCrow to deter them.

Wildlife Hotline

The DFW Wildlife Coalition operates a hotline (972-234-WILD) to provide humane, effective solutions for wildlife problems. The hotline is staffed daily from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. by trained volunteers, including Texas Master Naturalists.

The hotline provides free information on effective, humane solutions to common wildlife problems – including squirrels in attics, skunks under decks and fish disappearing from backyard ponds.

For callers who have found a juvenile animal, the volunteers provide information on how to re-unite the baby with its parents if possible. In the case of sick, injured or orphaned animals, hotline volunteers connect callers with licensed wildlife rehabilitators.

If you would like to learn more about urban wildlife, please visit www.dfwwildlife.org

Learning about and appreciating wildlife that is attracted to water gardens can be a great source of enjoyment and enrichment.

Bonnie Bradshaw is a Certified Wildlife Rehabilitator, Texas Master Naturalist and one of the founders of the DFW Wildlife Coalition.



Opossums consume large numbers of snakes, cockroaches and mice, and they don't carry rabies or distemper. They are extremely beneficial animals especially in urban areas.

