

# Be a Habitat



Carol Heiser

## Creating habitat is more than just hanging bird feeders.

By Carol A. Heiser

**O**ur connection to nature runs deep. Famed biologist E. O. Wilson calls this connection “biophilia,” or “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes.” When we sit on a bench in a garden surrounded by greenery, bask in the sun and watch butterflies float gently among flowers, we unconsciously feel a certain kinship that calms and restores us. We’re ‘hard-wired’ to respond this way.

“To the extent that each person can feel like a naturalist,” Wilson sug-

*This homeowner has done an excellent job of replacing a large portion of lawn with ground-covers, shrubs, and perennials that support a diversity of birds, insects, and other wildlife.*

gests, “the old excitement of the untrammelled world will be regained.”

Yet, in so much of the modern environment, we have managed to overlook that fundamental connection and have replaced our natural surroundings with artificial—some would say sterile—landscapes. We either clear, pave over, replant with exotic looking non-native species, or otherwise diminish the ecological value of outdoor spaces.

At the same time, we have pushed aside or permanently removed many of the native plant and animal communities that used to thrive on the land. Woodlands, meadows, and wetlands are often reduced to small patches or remnants after the primary development footprint is carved out. Wildlife is left with a woodlot here, a muddy puddle there, and acres and acres of lawn.



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*Be creative in your use of garden elements tucked among groupings of native plants. This small, recirculating jug of water provides a quick sip for songbirds.*

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Look for vertical spaces to improve habitat. If you don't have room for a vine over a fence, use a trellis instead, and plant a native species like this trumpet honeysuckle, which attracts hummingbirds.



A habitat at home is an oasis of many different plant types that can serve multiple functions. **Above:** The homeowner installed a green roof over the porch and completely replaced all turfgrass—what a contrast to the neighbors! **Left:** Tight spaces on a slope are filled with flowering plants that hold the soil and require little maintenance.

## Habitat at Home®

How do we recapture our connection with nature, improve the landscape for wildlife, and restore—if only in part—some microcosm of the natural ecosystems we've lost? The answer is surprisingly simple: If you're going to build, minimize the amount of vegetation and water sources removed; if it's already built, plant more habitat and add water features.

Habitat in the places where we live can take the form of a small flower garden in a side yard dotted with shrubs, a collection of potted native plants on a balcony, or a half-acre drainfield planted with perennials and grasses. Habitats can be big or small, depending on your site and your budget.



Install a small water feature in the ground, and who knows what will show up? The above is only a 3' x 5' insert, but salamanders still found the little pool and laid these egg masses. Frogs, dragonflies, and other critters will also delight; they'll eat mosquito larvae, too.



## Schoolyard Habitat

Habitat improvement projects can provide essential, nature-based amenities at schools, too, where children spend a large portion of their formative years. In Richard Louv's landmark book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, he describes a panoply of childhood ills that can in part be explained by our apparent alienation from nature. Louv writes the following about this disconnect:

*Our society is teaching young people to avoid direct experience in nature. That lesson is delivered in schools, families, even organizations devoted to the outdoors, and codified into the legal and regulatory structures of many of our communities. Our institutions, urban/suburban design, and cultural attitudes unconsciously associate nature with doom—while disassociating the outdoors from joy and solitude. . . . But as the young spend less and less of their lives in natural surroundings, their senses narrow, physiologically and psychologically, and this reduces the richness of human experience.*

Since a child's relationship with and connection to nature are shaped largely by early, positive experiences in the outdoors, we can provide these connections quite effectively on a daily basis by establishing and maintaining habitat gardens in local schoolyards.

## Corporate Habitat

For most people, when we're not at home we're usually... at work. Does your place of employment have an open space near the employee entrance, or a large empty lawn, or perhaps a small outdoor area that might be used when folks are on a break? The work place can be a great site to install a wildlife habitat.



An extensive habitat blankets a large portion of the schoolyard at Daniel's Run Elementary in Fairfax. The habitat's proximity to play areas makes it an ideal place for students to explore and interact with nature. Teachers use these gardens to teach Standards of Learning.



Wetland Studies and Solutions, Inc. in Gainesville is an exemplary model of corporate habitat success. The green roof seen here captures and treats rainwater, which significantly reduces the amount of runoff entering nearby creeks. The site also boasts a bioretention swale and permeable paving, all designed to get water back into the ground.



## Let Habitat Partners® Certify Your Site

Whether your habitat project is large or small, you can show your support of Virginia's wildlife by applying for a free Habitat Partners® certificate from the Department ([www.dgif.virginia.gov/habitat](http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/habitat)). The certificate is available for residences, businesses, or schools. Once your site becomes certified, you may then apply for a free Habitat Partners® sign to display on a fence post, entranceway, or other prominent location for visitors and passers-by to see.

The application is an outline that helps describe important habitat features you've improved, such as native plants that were installed to replace non-native ones; water features placed in the ground to supplement bird baths; and protective cover provided in the form of additional shrubs, brush piles, or nest boxes.

## When is a "Habitat" Not a Habitat?

Notice that in all our descriptions of wildlife habitat we have greatly downplayed the presence of feeders. Having 10 feeders and a bird bath in the middle of a sea of lawn is not a habitat. True, a "feeding station" is a great way to bring birds and small

Instead, install a couple of water features and surround them with groundcovers, flowers, shrubs, and small trees. Add a fallen log or brush pile and a nest box or two.

And remember, too, to make time to immerse yourself, as often as possible, in the beauty of a habitat garden. Naturalist John Muir once wrote, "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out . . . that wildness is a necessity." We can reconnect with the outdoors starting in our own backyards, where touching nature close to home "makes all the world kin." □

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A rain garden is a great way to break up the monotony of a large lawn and improve water quality at the same time. Here at the Product Development Office of Wyeth Consumer Health Care in Richmond, the garden was installed with pathways and an inviting bench. Employees at Wyeth volunteer their time on a wildlife habitat committee.

mammals closer to windows for us to see and appreciate; but the best habitats are those which have water sources available to a variety of wildlife species and an abundance of natural food sources like berries, seeds, and nectar from a diversity of plant types. Feeders are only incidental to the habitat equation.



Volunteers install a wetland buffer around the edges of a stormwater retention pond at Union Bank Shares in Caroline County.

## Digging Deeper

### Books

*Bringing Nature Home: How Native Plants Sustain Wildlife in Our Gardens*, by Douglas W. Tallamy; 2007, Timber Press, OR.

*Natural Landscaping: Gardening with Nature to Create a Backyard Paradise*, by Sally Roth; 1997, Rodale Press, PA.

*The Natural Habitat Garden*, by Ken Druse; 2004, Timber Press, OR.

*Gardening with Nature*, by James van Sweden; 2003, Watson-Guptill Publications, NY & Grayson Publishing, DC.

*Designing Outdoor Environments for Children: Landscaping Schoolyards, Gardens and Playgrounds*, by Lolly Tai et al.; 2006, McGraw-Hill, NY.

*Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, by Richard Louv; 2005, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, NC.

*Schoolyard Habitats: A How-To Guide*, 2001, National Wildlife Federation, Reston, VA.

### Web sites

- *Native Plants for Wildlife Habitat and Conservation Landscaping, Chesapeake Bay Watershed*, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (84-page booklet with color photos of recommended plants): [www.nps.gov/plants/pubs/Chesapeake/toc.htm](http://www.nps.gov/plants/pubs/Chesapeake/toc.htm)

- *Better Backyard: A Citizens' Resource Guide to Beneficial Landscaping and Habitat Restoration in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed* (61-page booklet): [www.chesapeakebay.net/pubs/781.pdf](http://www.chesapeakebay.net/pubs/781.pdf)

- Habitat Partners® Web pages of the VA Department of Game and Inland Fisheries: [www.dgif.virginia.gov/habitat](http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/habitat)

### Habitat at Home® DVD Available

The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries has produced a new DVD that illustrates several types of home habitat gardens. For a copy of the DVD (\$12), visit our online store at [www.HuntFishVA.com](http://www.HuntFishVA.com) or call (804) 367-2569 after April 15th.