

# Creating Habitat

...a few good things to know



*part of a continuing series of water-wise workshops*

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# Creating Habitat

## Introduction

*Yes you can make a difference:*

Creating a habitat where we can enjoy birds and butterflies in our own backyard is much more than a romantic notion. When creating habitat we contribute in our own small way to restoring and reclaiming the natural world. Most birds and butterflies have very small home ranges, and you really can make a difference by providing the native vegetation and garden structure necessary to support their needs.

*Habitat creation is also Water Conservation:*

Habitat gardens are water-wise for a couple of reasons. One: local native plant species provide food, shelter and nesting materials, the fact that they require very little in the way of water is an added bonus. The second reason is this: most birds are not attracted to large expanses of manicured lawn. Think about it: there is no shelter thus they are vulnerable to predators in these wide open spaces. There is no food here; routine mowing removes any seed production that might occur. Would you want to hang out in a dangerous place with no food? Right... me neither. Wall to wall turf is by far the biggest water user in the residential landscape. It is not sustainable and eliminating or reducing the size of your lawn is key to the creation of a any water-wise garden.

*A habitat garden is a natural garden:*

We need to loosen up a little. A garden where everything is clipped, manicured, and sprayed for pests is not a place birds or butterflies want to be. It is actually a potentially life threatening ecological desert as far as they are concerned. We need to go a bit wild. Not so fast with the hedge trimmers, pruning shears, and leaf blowers. And stop already with the pesticides. Here is why:

Stop pruning and clipping everything! Let trees and shrubs open up a bit. This creates a place for shelter and nesting. Allowing shrubs to branch to the ground will provide much needed protection and shelter for many bird species. Go a bit further and plant shrubs that have thorns so the birds can run in and the predators will stay out. Restrict pruning to the winter months after fruits and berries are gone and before the nesting season begins. If you must prune, then do so carefully, be mindful who's 'house' you are cutting into.

Don't be so quick to tidy up - rather than blowing or raking the ground under plantings, leave some of the natural leaf litter as mulch to provide an important resource for ground foraging birds. If you have a dead limb or two or even a completely dead tree consider leaving it; this is nature's way (of course you must consider safety) - one reason nest boxes are put up in yards is there are no snags or dying trees. A brush pile in the corner of the yard can also provide valuable cover for backyard birds.

Stop dead-heading all of your flowers. Many birds are seed eaters. Allow at least some flowers to go to seed instead of constantly dead-heading (clipping off spent blooms).

Stop with the pesticides! Birds eat insects, let them do the job they were created to do.

Plant natives. Replace the habitat that has been lost to insensitive development by planting native shrubs such as Toyon, Sugar Bush (*Rhus o.*), and Cleveland Sage.

The good news about Mother nature: She has been around a lot longer than Suburbia. It is amazing how the natural environment restores balance to itself when we provide the essential elements and then simply take our hands off. At the end of the day we wind up with a beautiful, low maintenance natural garden where a variety of birds and butterflies flourish... what's not to like about that?

## Creating Habitat

### Basic Design – Structure of the Garden: Build it and they will come.

#### *Meeting basic needs - Form Follows Function:*

If something is going to work well it needs to be built well. We begin the design process of all things by asking the question: “what does this thing need to do?” Whether it is a rocket ship to the moon or a peanut butter sandwich, the same question remains – what is my objective? In the case of habitat, we must then create a place where the basic needs of birds and butterflies are met. No different from any other living creature, they need: shelter, water, food and a safe place to raise their young. Providing for these needs then becomes the guiding criteria for our garden plan – this is form following function.

#### *Transition Zones:*

In the case of birds, we speak in terms of *transition zones*. A transition zone is where the layout of a garden mimics the natural habitat. It is an area that is structurally diverse with plants growing at different heights creating edges, openings and understory layers that move gradually to more open areas as would be seen in a wooded area moving to a meadow. These transitional zones are an important feature of the habitat garden offering food, shelter and nesting sites.

Keep in mind that birds and butterflies travel through the landscape without regard to property lines or fences. Most residential lots do not have the space to plant a forest but you *can* apply these principles by planting progressively lower plants as you move out from the property boundary. Even small yards can “borrow” from nearby habitats. A tree 2 doors down works as well as one in your own backyard. Widen your perspective and consider the overall landscape of the neighborhood. A small space tip: Vines are a great way to provide height in a narrow space. The thicket effect of vines provides food and protective shelter for smaller species.

Butterflies: as the structure of the garden relates to butterflies... They require a sunny exposure that is sheltered from the wind, as well as a place to warm themselves (they are cold-blooded). A few large stones in full sun can provide a resting spot where they can gather the warmth and energy to fly.

*Water:* a reliable source of fresh clean water is an essential element for your habitat garden. Butterflies (particularly male) do something called ‘puddling’: drinking from a shallow puddle in mud or sand. It is thought that they take in minerals and salt this way.

Birds: The site and the sound of moving water is very attractive to birds. Commercial Bird baths are one good way to go, but most are really too deep. Be sure that the surface of bird baths have enough texture to provide sure footing, and a gradual, shallow approach. Most birds are fearful of depths over 2 to 3 inches. Place large flat stones in water where the top is dry and exposed. Bird baths that are 36” in diameter are a good size for even communal bathing. Never add chemicals to reduce algae,

Location of water: another good example of form following function. Locate your water source where it can be viewed, either from a window in your home or near a sitting area in your garden. Keep in mind that bathing birds are preoccupied and slowed down by wet feathers thereby making them vulnerable to predators (read: CATS). Keep your water source away from heavy shrubbery where cats may lurk looking for a free and easy meal. Some birds prefer water near the ground – make sure this is placed in an open area. Locate the water close to a hose so replenishing it is an easy task. Even better, run a drip spray that re-fills the water every day on an automatic valve so you don’t have to.

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### *Food:*

Plant selection should be directed by native food sources. As much as it is possible, provide a wide variety of plants in your habitat garden.

The good news is there are many beautiful native trees, shrubs and perennials that are natural food sources for both birds and butterflies.

Birds eat seeds, insects and berries, Hummingbirds are big nectar feeders. Butterflies need two types of plants to be attracted to your garden. Nectar plants are for the adult stage. Host plants or larval foods feed the caterpillars that will become butterflies.

Hummingbirds are attracted to bright colors especially orange and red with a flower structure that is tubular.

Adult butterflies are attracted to flower structures that are flat on top; this provides a landing surface with many small flowers of a tubular structure.

The plant list that follows provides a detailed list of these food sources.

MY NOTES:

## Creating Habitat plant list – perennials

Botanical Name	Common Name	Bird	Butterfly	Notes	Sun-Shade	Water
<i>Achillea millifolium</i>	Yarrow	x	x	P Ab L N S	sun	L
<i>Agapanthus</i>	Lily of the Nile	x	x	P Ab N H	shade PM	M
<i>Alcea rosea</i>	Hollyhocks		x	P L	sun	M
<i>Aloe</i>	NCN	x		P N H	sun	L
<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	Milk Weed	x	x	P Ab N L H	sun	M
<i>Centranthus ruber</i>	Jupiter's Beard		x	P Ab N	sun	L
<i>Coreopsis</i>	NCN	x	x	A-P N S Ab	sun	L
<i>Cosmos</i>	NCN	x		A S Ab	sun	M
<i>Cuphea ignea</i>	Cigar Plant	x		P H	sun	L to M
<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	Purple Coneflower	x	x	P S N Ab	sun	L
<i>Encelia californica</i>	NCN	x		P S	sun	VL
<i>Erigeron</i>	Fleabane		x	P N Ab	sun	L to M
<i>Eriogonum</i>	Buckwheat	x	x	P L S Ab	sun	L
<i>Eschscholzia californica</i>	Calif. Poppy	x	x	A S L	sun	L
<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>	Fennel	x	x	P S L	sun	M
<i>Gaillardia pulchella</i>	Blanket Flower	x	x	P S Ab	sun	L
<i>Gaura lindheimeri</i>	Gaura	x		P H	sun	L to M
<i>Helianthus</i>	Sunflower	x	x	A L S	sun	M
<i>Hesperaloe parviflora</i>	Red Yucca	x		P H	sun	L
<i>Heuchera</i>	Coral Bells	x		P H	shade PM	L to M
<i>Lantana spp</i>	Lantana	x	x	P H Ab	sun	L
<i>Lavandula</i>	Lavender	x	x	P N H Ab	sun	L
<i>Lupinus</i>	Lupine	x	x	A-P L N H	sun	L to M
<i>Monarda</i>	Bee Balm	x	x	P N H Ab	sun	M
<i>Nepeta</i>	Cat Mint		x	P Ab N	sun	M
<i>Penstemon</i>	NCN	x	x	P N L H Ab	sun	VL to M
<i>Verbena</i>	NCN		x	N Ab	sun	L to M
<i>Zauscheneria calif.</i>	California Fuchsia	x	x	P N H	sun	VL

*Notes:*

H - Hummingbirds Ab - Adult Butterfly A - Annual P - Perennial F - Fruit  
Sh - Shelter-Cover S - Seeds B - Berries L - Larval Food N - Nectar Source

## Creating Habitat plant list – shrubs

Botanical Name	Common Name	Bird	Butterfly	Notes	Sun-Shade	Water
Abelia	NCN	x	x	H Ab	sun or shade	M
Arctostaphylos	Manzanita	x	x	Sh E N H F	sun or shade	VL to L
A. Howard McMinn	garden friendly					
A. Loiuise Edmunds	garden friendly					
A. Sunset	garden friendly					
Baccharis p.	Coyote Brush	x	x	Sh E L S	sun or shade	L
Buddleja	Butterfly Bush	x	x	N H Ab	sun	M
Ceanothus	California Lilac	x	x	S L Sh Ab	shade PM	L
	Island Bush					
Galvezia speciosa	Snapdragon	x	x	L H Sh	shade PM	L
Lobelia laxiflora	NCN	x		H N	sun	VL
Mahonia	Oregon Grape	x		B N	shade PM	L to M
Plumbago auriculata	NCN		x	L	sun or shade	M
Ribes	Currant	x	x	Sh L B H	shade PM	L to M
note: R. aureum & A. speciosum good for our zone but know they are summer dormant						
Rosa spp	Roses shrub type	x		F Sh	sun	L to M
Salvia spp	Ornamental Sage	x		H	sun	VL to M
Heteromeles arbutifolia	Toyon	x		B	sun or shade	VL
Ligustrum	Privet	x	x	B N Ab	sun or shade	L
Carissa	Natal Plum	x		F	sun or shade	M
Prunus ilicifolia	Hollyleaf Cherry	x	x	F Sh Ab L	sun or shade	VL
Prunus lyonii	Catalina Cherry	x		F Sh	sun or shade	L
Rhamnus*	Coffee Berry	x	x	F Sh Ab L	shade PM	L
* R. Californica	Mound San Bruno'			more garden tolerant species		VL to L
* R. crocea	Redberry			very good food source!!		VL
Rhus ovata	Sugar Bush	x		B	sun or shade	VL
Sambucus mexicana	Western Elderberry	x		B	sun	L

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## Creating Habitat plant list – Trees

Botanical Name	Common Name	Bird	Butterfly	Notes	Sun-Shade	Water
<i>Cercis occidentalis</i>	Western Redbud	x		S F	sun or shade	L
<i>Chilopsis linearis</i>	Desert Willow	x		H	sun	L
<i>Platanus racemosa</i>	California Sycamore	x	x	L Sh	sun	L to M
<i>Quercus spp</i>	Oaks	x	x	L N Sh	sun	L
<i>Sambucus mexicana</i>	Western Elderberry	x		S B	sun or shade	L

## Creating Habitat plant list – Vines

<i>Lonicera</i>	Honeysuckle	x		B N H	sun	L
<i>Passiflora</i>	Passion Flower		x	L	sun	L to M
<i>Tecomaria</i>	Cape Honeysuckle	x		H	sun	L

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