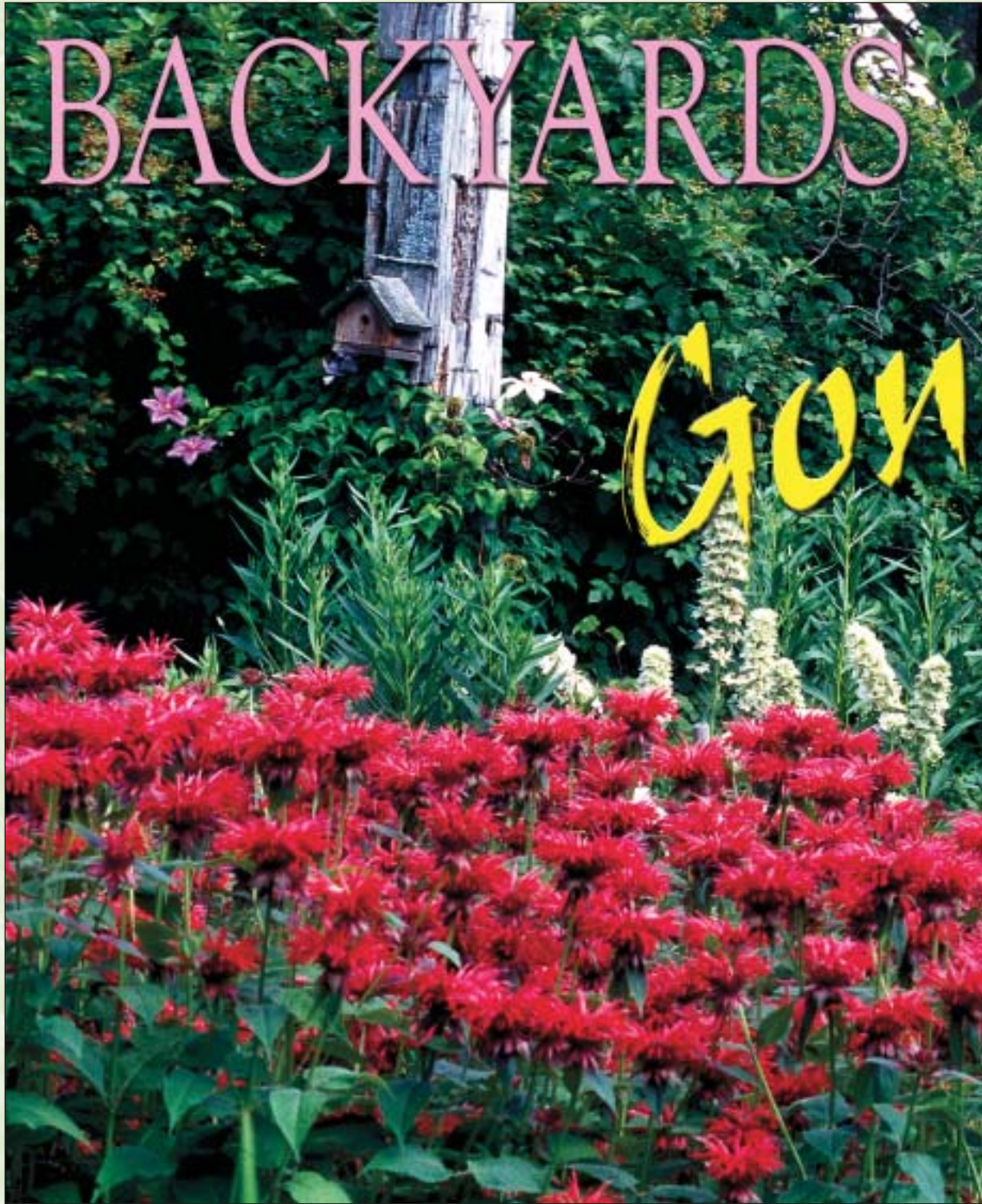


BACKYARDS

GO ON

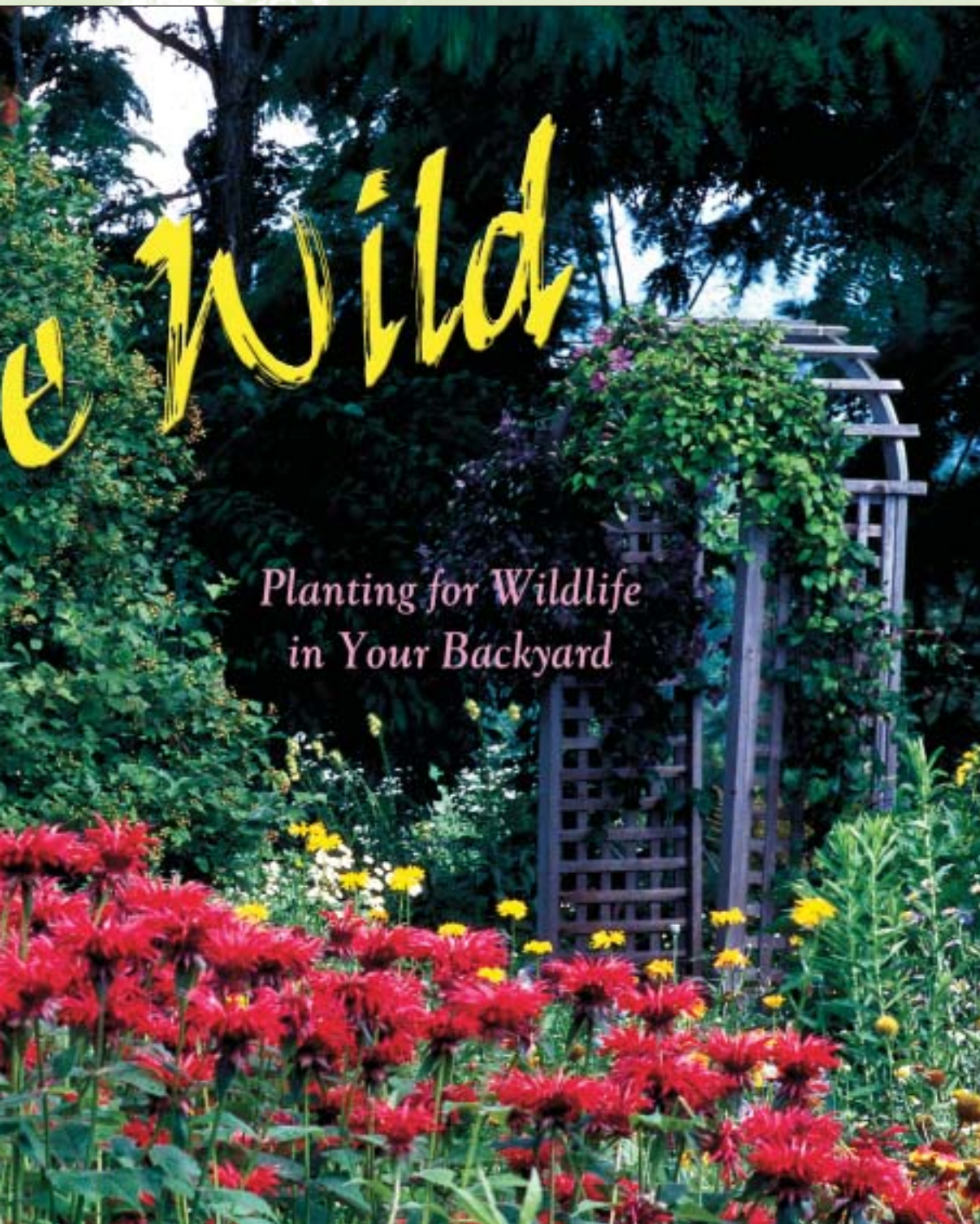


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Are you ready to get outside and get your hands in the soil? Early spring is a great time of year to landscape your yard with wildlife in mind, using native vegetation, cover structures and water features. It doesn't take much to get started — just a basic understanding of wildlife habitat concepts, along with inventory techniques and plant suggestions.

Why Habitat in Your Backyard?

Your backyard is a mini-ecosystem. No matter what type of area you live in or the size of your property, you are influencing the local wildlife by what you do with your land. This has particular significance in New Hampshire, where we are experiencing rapid development. Most New



e Wild

Planting for Wildlife in Your Backyard



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Conifers like yews, hemlocks and spruce are important cover for migrating birds like the white-throated sparrow.

© JIM BLOCK PHOTO

Wildflowers bring color to your garden, and summer nectar and fall seeds to wildlife in your yard.

Hampshire land is in parcels of less than 10 acres, held by private landowners like you. Many of the state's key wildlife species occur on this private land, rather than on conservation land.

At one time, your trim backyard may have been a forest that hosted waxwings and tanagers that feasted on insects in summer and berries in winter. Barred owls nested in hollow trees, and

salamanders hid from predators in rotting logs. Deer drank water from pools of snowmelt, where wood frogs laid their eggs and announced the spring with their quacking calls.

While that rich patch of wilderness may be gone, re-creating aspects of it in your yard can support an array of wildlife and give you the

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BY
MARILYN C. WYZGA

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MARLENE WYZGA PHOTO

The amount of space you have shouldn't limit you, as shown by these young students, who increased available habitat next to their school by turning a narrow alley into a haven for birds and an outdoor classroom.

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opportunity to see some of these creatures up close. Enhancing wildlife habitat also helps recover some of the rapidly disappearing natural landscapes that define the character of New Hampshire.

A Habitat Primer

The word “wildlife” often brings to mind charismatic megafauna such as majestic moose or elusive black bear — but wildlife is a big category including mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, insects and fish. As an area is transformed from largely forested (rural) to fragmented and isolated small forests (suburban and urban), the wildlife that inhabit the area change. Which wildlife you will see on your land depends on several factors: the size of your site and adjoining lands, your

location in the state, the site's characteristics and features, human activity on the site and available habitat and its arrangement.

Wildlife needs habitat: a suitable combination of cover, food and water within the space they call home. The word “habitat” by itself is rather meaningless unless it is associated with the specific needs of a particular species. (A good field guide will help you figure out what various species require.) Space should be adequate for seeking a mate, breeding and feeding and rearing offspring. Appropriate cover would provide protection from the elements and escape from predators, as well as a place to rest and raise young. With adequate food resources year round, an animal would survive when energy demands are greatest, such as for reproduction in spring and warmth during winter. Water sources should be clean and accessible. Think about wildlife survival through the seasons; what will a bird do for cover in your yard on a windy day when the temperature plummets below zero?

Of these four components, you can most influence cover, water and food. Plants provide most of these needs — mast, seeds, fruit, foliage, twigs, structure; they also require less maintenance and create a more sustainable landscape.

Where to Begin

To enhance habitat, you need to know what you already have. Spend time on your property, evaluating the land features for the habitat elements that already exist. Inventory your site through the seasons. What wildlife and plant communities were here before your house? Take a look at the bigger picture — the surrounding community — and figure out how your yard fits in. Look at soils maps and have a sample tested; this will give you a clue to what plants will thrive there. Note existing trees, shrubs, flowers and vines. In summer, nectar, green plants, fruits and insects make up much of the food base, but as the weather cools in the fall, these decline. Look around for sources of fall and winter mast — fruits, nuts and seeds — that help wildlife build winter fat reserves.

A Recipe for Your Landscape

Providing a place for wildlife doesn't require digging up your entire backyard; you can start with a few small changes. There is no one recipe for backyard wildlife habitat; each landowner needs to determine what strategy will work for a particular space, depending on existing conditions, wildlife needs and personal determination to get things done.

What to plant

Many of these plants are native and adapted to the sandy, well-drained soils that make up much of southern New Hampshire. Most will thrive in full sun or woodland edges:

- Shadbush (*Amelanchier* spp.)
- White cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*)
- Colorado spruce (*Picea pungens*)
- Highbush cranberry (*Viburnum trilobum*)
- Gray dogwood (*Cornus racemosa*)
- Winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*)
- Inkberry (*Ilex glabra*)
- Rugosa rose (*Rosa rugosa*)
- Bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*)
- Lowbush blueberry (*Vaccinium angustifolium*)
- Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva ursi*)
- Honeysuckle shrub or vine (*Diervilla lonicera*, *Lonicera sempervirens*)
- Beebalm (*Monarda* spp.)
- Butterfly Weed (*Aesclepias tuberosa*)
- Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*)



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Hard mast — beechnuts, acorns and other nuts — are fall food staples for many wildlife species.



MARILYN WYZGA PHOTO

Just add water, and invite a world of diversity into your yard. At Fish and Game in Concord, we built a rubber-lined pond that attracts water striders, beetles and frogs, plus dragonflies that land on potted pickerelweed. Fox, deer and birds stop by to bathe.



© NED THERRIEN PHOTO

Snags (dead and decaying trees) on your property are great sites for birds to find insect food and nesting opportunities.

Consider three questions for wildlife habitat: *What do I have? ...What do I want? ...How will I get it?* The first question will be answered by your inventory. Now, what do you want? Knowing that habitat can be many things to many creatures makes your job of designing a wildlife landscape easier; you can select habitat elements for your yard that will attract and support particular groups of wildlife species. In any case, address the basic needs for wildlife habitat — to ensure their survival, provide food, water and cover in an arrangement that allows the animals to easily access each.

How will you get it? Once you've completed your inventory, you can start to fill the gaps. The key is to provide diversity. Use what you have, then add a few plants that have wildlife value, are low-maintenance and locally available; or set up a birdbath or pond.

As you develop a landscape plan, take your cues from the surrounding land: what grows in your area? Choosing plants from that palette will connect your yard to the broader landscape.

The ultimate aim is a species-rich, environmentally diverse habitat. Turf may be typical for the modern yard, but it offers little in the way of wildlife habitat. Gradually replace your lawn with woodland plantings or meadows; you can mow edges and paths for a groomed look. Combine evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs with vines, groundcovers and perennials, for a variety of layers and age classes of plants. Include fruit or nut-bearing plants. Look for nectar-producing flowers to support butterflies and hummingbirds. Choose plants that produce flowers or seeds at different times of the year. Plant shade trees where they can grow into maturity without interfering with wires, buildings or sidewalks.

Imitate Nature's Design

Combine your plants in a variety of layers like those found in local natural areas: a canopy formed by the tallest trees, the understory formed by smaller trees, the shrub layer, and the ground layers of wildflowers, ferns, grasses and mosses. Planting various layers promotes biodiversity; in general, the greater the number of distinct vertical layers, the more diverse the plant life, meaning more types of habitat that will support an array of animal life.

A water source — such as a small pond or birdbath set on the ground — will benefit a variety of wildlife from birds to butterflies to amphibians. A pond can also shelter small fish, diving beetles, frogs and other amphibians, and provide them a place to breed. Be sure to keep the bath regularly cleaned, or install a circulating pump in the pond to discourage mosquitoes from laying eggs.

Coniferous evergreens, like spruce, fir, and hemlock, protect overwintering animals from snow, ice, rain and wind. They become important

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Gamebirds like grouse will feed on viburnum fruits, which persist through the winter.

Include in your wildlife landscape:

- early summer fruits
- fall fruits
- fall nuts
- fall seeds
- persistent winter fruits
- winter cover
- spring/summer seeds
- herbaceous plants
- hummingbird nectar plants
- vines
- dead or decaying trees
- artificial nest boxes
- water sources
- fallen logs
- feeding structures and grit areas



© JIM BLOCK PHOTO

Keep the conventional plantings and vegetable beds close to the house, and plant the wild garden along the perimeter of your property, where it can link up with wild gardens in neighboring yards to create continuous habitat.

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nesting places for birds in spring. Butterflies will seek shelter on vines and the undersides of leaves. Amphibians like salamanders and toads need the cool, damp shelter of leaf litter and rotting logs. Small mammals such as squirrels, hares and chipmunks can escape the eyes of hawks and foxes in stone walls, raspberry thickets and evergreen cover.

The tendency for white and gray birches to die young and decay quickly is an advantage for cavity-nesting birds like nuthatches and titmice. Ideally, keep a dead or dying tree — away from the house — to provide nesting sites for birds and small mammals. Woodpeckers will excavate a hole in the snag to find insects. Other cavity nesters, like tree swallows, will adopt the hole for nesting. Where cavities aren't available, build a nest box designed for the species you want to support (*see page 19*).

In this way, you create a garden plant community that mimics a natural plant community, and provide different options for wildlife at different times of the year.

Go Native

Include native plants in your garden schemes. When insects are drawn into the garden from local, relatively natural areas, some of them will find a preferred food and will be induced to stay. Insects form the base of many food chains, so providing for them will invite the wildlife that feed on them, and the wildlife that feed on THEM, and so on.

By choosing native plants, you avoid spreading invasive plants such as autumn olive, Japanese barberry and oriental bittersweet. Although these plants have wildlife value, they crowd out the region's distinct natural vegetation. Using native eastern plants can also improve your gardening success, as they tend to flourish in our conditions, without fertilizers and pesticides.



Butterflies and bees feed on the nectar of purple coneflowers; goldfinches love their seeds.

Buy from reputable, local dealers who propagate the plants they sell, or can tell you who propagated the plants. Wild collecting, besides breaking laws, disrupts plant communities and can cause their demise. It also just transplants a garden from the wild to your yard, rather than increasing the diversity of the natural landscape.

Habitat Health and Maintenance

Increasing a garden's plant structure and its habitat structure will increase its diversity and reduce your effort in the garden. Be vigilant for the first few years, watering until plants become established. Keep foot traffic to a minimum. After that, only an occasional mowing, weeding or pruning will be necessary.

Wildlife benefits when you relax, so don't fuss about tidiness. All the so-called yard debris that litters the landscape in fact feeds the nutrient cycle. Last year's leaves harbor overwintering insects and their eggs, which migrating birds will feast on when they return in the spring, if you can hold off raking.

If you've chosen a plant community that's suited to your region and the specific conditions on your property, you'll be rewarded with a garden that not only enhances biodiversity but also conserves water and energy — including your energy.

Continue thinking in the bigger picture. While backyard habitat helps, it's only part of the answer. Equally important is encouraging your local government to protect large areas of forest and wetlands where populations of wildlife can survive.

What are you waiting for? Dig in!



Wildlife Habitat Partners

These organizations have wildlife habitat information and programs:

- Fish and Game sponsors a schoolyard habitat program, Project HOME. Call Marilyn Wyzga at (603) 271-3211 or visit www.wildlife.state.nh.us
- UNH Cooperative Extension: <http://ceinfo.unh.edu> (printed resources including a wildlife plant list, Coverts volunteer program)
- Audubon Society of New Hampshire: www.nh.audubon.org (urban bird study; urban wildlife habitat enhancement)
- New England Wild Flower Society: www.newfs.org (native botanical garden, classes, printed materials, plant sales)
- National Wildlife Federation: www.nwf.org (Backyard Habitat Program and certification)