

# Backyard Conservation and Habitat Creation: A Paradigm Shift

All you have to do is incorporate native plants into your landscape.....and begin:

Being aware of inputs and outputs – cosmetic pesticide & fertilizer use, irrigation-dependent vegetation, sending compostable items to a landfill, polluted stormwater runoff, excess mowing etc.

Embracing natural processes – Insects are important players to be admired; chewed leaves, webbing, and nests etc are signs of a functioning habitat; select only plants that don't require life support in Iowa's extreme weather; dead trees provide habitat, old plant stems left over the winter provide food and shelter for many animals... etc.

**Incorporate native plants into the landscape:** lots of ways to achieve this goal.

- Seed, bare root/potted plants, or a combo of the two. Takes 2 – 3 years to develop, usually goes thru an “ugly duckling” phase – include quick-flowering species as “cover crop” to help get thru this stage. Emphasize diversity of species, bloom times, and plant forms.
- Beware “meadow in a can” mixes – these invariably have non-native and poorly chosen (cheap/readily available) species and are guaranteed to fail
- Species selection not as easy as one might think: review pitfalls in *Wild Ones* article, see list of short showy species (sorted by blooming period).
- Rain gardens/biocells: plantings that temporarily pond rainwater and let it seep into the ground rather than flowing directly to the storm sewer. Purifies pollutants in the process!
- Filter strips or swales in areas where stormwater pools naturally – if you have a wet spot somewhere, turn it into habitat and forget about trying to mow it or drain it.
- Pond edging – a 3 ft (or more) tall fringe of plants will deter geese and improve habitat
- Formal beds – blocks or drifts of plants can be established, altho native species often move around/reseed out of their assigned locations...some maintenance likely needed
- Don't forget shrubs – there are numerous great native understory species

**Provide Habitat:** Food, shelter, water, living space...build it and they will come!

- Replace lawn grass with plants that provide food, shelter, or nesting space (native forbs and grasses, trees and shrubs) for birds, butterflies, other insects etc.
- Add water (saucers, ponds, bird baths, rain gardens) for birds, butterflies, insects etc.
- Leave dead trees standing for habitat – everything from birds to insects will appreciate it
- Leaving the previous growing seasons' dead plant stems standing thru the winter provides shelter for wildlife, and the seeds are a food source. Trim back or burn in early spring.
- Be sure to select some nectar-rich plant species for butterflies and other sippers
- Install bat houses, bird houses, feeders, water sources for birds and other critters

**How small is too small?** No such thing!

- Even small changes in habitat can aid local animals and pollinators, and improve soil/water quality, something as small as adding a native plant section to the edge of an existing bed (but don't mix w/plants that need irrigation or fertilizers)
- Just getting interested in native species? A small bed is a good way to begin: the 5S rule: Start Small, Short, Sunny and Showy (see short showy species list)
- Children find small plots novel and unthreatening
- Any size native plant garden offers interest and educational opportunities to neighbors and friends – for both novel gardening ideas and conservation concepts
- Island effect: a network of native plant islands in a large area of urban and/or farm land may allow native animals and insects to move from one small habitat to the next.

**Save money and Do Less Work:** establishing low input native plant stands in areas that were routinely mowed saves time, money & water/chemical inputs. Many grass lawns are mowed 30

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times per year; it doesn't take long to recover the price of native seed/plants....and you never get your mowing time back! Plus, you will have habitat instead of a monoculture of green.

**Embrace Insects:** they do far more good than harm, we usually only hear about the bad guys.

- Bugs are good botanists! Many native plants have specific insect "relations". Learning to appreciate insect life cycles (even if they nibble a bit) makes life easier, and lower input.
- Insects are not out to get you – learn to look for them and watch/admire their antics
- Large % of pollinators are insects – butterflies do more than just feed themselves!

**Be conscious of "inputs" and "outputs":** What effort/resources/chemicals does your landscaping require? What waste comes off your land? Why is this necessary/reasonable? Avoid unnecessary cosmetic use of pesticides, fertilizers, water, and landfill space.

- Plants: do they need water if it's hot and dry? Using native species that are adapted to the local climate eliminates the need for watering....you shouldn't need to own a sprinkler! And irrigating with water purified for human consumption is truly consumptive landscaping.
- Fertilizers: why fertilize grass? If it only increases lawn growth that then needs mowing, what is the rationale? Who's telling you this is necessary/reasonable?
- Dandelions, crab grass, clover – why must you get rid of these plants? Dandelions are not native but provide early spring insect food and are difficult to get rid of without serious chemical application. Clover is a great addition to your lawn – it adds nitrogen and habitat. Massive amounts of chemicals are used cosmetically to maintain a monoculture of non-native grass. Why? Note, in Ontario, Canada this is illegal.
- Pesticides: why are they being used? Many native plants have specific insects that take up residence, go thru a short life cycle that may include caterpillars feeding and/or web-making.....a great natural process to watch rather than reason use pesticide. Remember, chewed leaves are a sign that the habitat is functioning (plants make food, animals eat).
- If nothing but the lawnmower moves in your yard, you are missing an opportunity for more interesting landscaping, and someone is spending unneeded time, money, and resources on the (unregulated internal combustion gasoline-powered) lawnmower.
- Lawn clippings, leaves – compost rather than send off in bags. Be aware of your outputs.
- Watch runoff: Rain conveys pesticides/fertilizers/animal wastes from your landscaping to storm sewers, leading to the need for expensive purification before use as drinking water.
- Examine who is suggesting high-input landscaping & management – are they likely to profit? Challenge recommendations that lead to sales of high-input landscape supplies.

**Fight Invasive species:** many plants still available commercially are a threat to natural areas

- These include: buckthorn, crown vetch, tree of heaven, birds foot trefoil, black locust, burning bush, dame's rocket, Miscanthus, reed canary grass, sweet clover
- If something is advertized to "naturalize easily" – beware of invasive potential!
- Check the web before you buy, for example: [www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/](http://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/), <http://dnr.wi.gov/invasives/>, <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/invasives/index.html>

**Slow down:** Savor the quiet things in life! Use your native planting to relax outdoors.

- Take time to drift thru your native planting, just looking around – you'll find you love it!
- Look for interesting insects: turn over leaves and look carefully at flowers...watch!
- Put seating near your native plant bed - and sit in it!
- Whimsical is good – a small statue or other light-hearted items that draw a little smile when noticed can add to the "feel" of your new habitat ☺

**Lists of recommended native landscaping plants:** sorted by height, sun, moisture tolerance etc. Also, a list of plants to avoid! [http://www.prrcd.org/inl/recommended\\_plants.htm](http://www.prrcd.org/inl/recommended_plants.htm)