

Wild Things

You make my yard sing, you make everything ... groovy!

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BY SUSAN RANDSTROM

With winter in full swing, but spring on the way, why not take advantage of the wonderful garden "inside" activities offered in the Chicago area?

Now is the perfect time to develop a plan to guide your spring garden design. A class or workshop might give you the impetus to turn your plan into a reality

To get you thinking, you might want to check out, "Wild Things: a Chicago Wilderness Conference for People and Nature." A day-long exchange of information, the event is being held at Northeastern Illinois University, and sounds like it has something for everyone interested in gardening. This conference is organized

by Chicago Wilderness, an alliance of nearly 200 public and private groups that have a shared interest in the natural communities within our region. Prominent organizations such as Audubon -- Chicago Region, The Nature Conservancy and Northeastern Illinois University are supporting it. With more than 100 presentations, home gardeners from expert to amateur should find something to get excited about. Presentations range from the science of habitat management to botany to zoology to backyard and neighborhood conservation.

"This conference is designed to help people realize their connection to the natural world," said Greg Rajskey, the conference chairman. "We humans are natural creatures too, wild things in our own right."

If you are a home gardener like I am, with a growing interest in using native plants, you'll enjoy presentations on how to incorporate these species into the home landscape. Growing plants native to our region makes life so much easier for all of us -- we get a low-maintenance garden that conserves water. The birds and butterflies benefit as well, by getting native food and shelter, which, in turn, makes it easier for them to provide pest control.

How to make a wildlife-friendly garden

Marian Thill, a professional landscaper and naturalist will host "Backyard Gardening for Birds and Butterflies" at the conference.

Thill gardens with all types of native plants at her suburban home -- a typical lot approximately 66 feet by 125 feet -- showing that you don't need huge acreage to create a bit of wild Chicago. Her philosophy has attracted 75 species of birds and 19 species of butterflies.

I asked Thill what an average homeowner can plant to make a garden more wildlife-friendly, and a wealth of knowledge flowed.



Viceroy butterflies are attracted to the native asters that bloom in the autumn. Photograph courtesy of Carol Freeman; www.inbeautywalk.com.

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- • By choosing plants that are native to our region, we are attracting the right insects to feed the regional birds and their young. Use native species only. Wildlife isn't interested in cultivars. Plant native Echinacea (a pale-purple Coneflower) to attract butterflies in summer, and provide seed for birds in winter.
- • Plant Prairie Dock and Cup Plant (members of the Silphium or Sunflower Family) for the bees and butterflies. Also, birds love to drink from the well-named cup plant, whose leaves envelop its square stem, forming a "cup" that holds water.
- • Native asters do triple duty as they are host plants for the Pearl Crescent butterfly, provide seed for the native sparrows and also offer nectar for the butterflies.
- • The butterflies will come for the nectar of only very specific native plants. Bees and butterflies love the native pinkish-purple agastache herb and the native monarda flower.
- • Plant milkweed. Monarch butterflies will lay their eggs only on the milkweed plant (*Asclepias syriaca*). The larvae eat the leaves and become toxic to birds, which protects them into adulthood.
- • Hummingbirds are attracted to red and pink tubular flowers. They love the nectar of the native Monarda or Bee Balm and Wild Columbine. Bees love them too.
- • Plant native viburnum shrubs (*Viburnum dentatum*) for their berries and also as shelter for birds. Cedar waxwings, robins, cardinals, blue jays and the gray catbird will take up residence in them.
- • Serviceberry (*Amelanchier*) shrubs provide berries for robins and are edible for humans too.
- • Water plays an all-important role in attracting wildlife. A pond or birdbath keep birds coming back for a drink or a bath; watching them can be entertaining.
- • Native gardens conserve water. As society has drained its wetlands because of development and covered the land with asphalt for our cars, water conservation has become a crucial issue. Prairie plants have deep roots that direct the water back into the soil and, in turn, help to refill our natural aquifers. How native plants work demonstrates how everything is connected. Also, native plant roots retain more moisture in the soil than do those of turf grass.
- • Natural pest control: Use plants that attract native birds so they will eat the insects that we call pests.

CONFERENCE FACTS

Wild Things: a Chicago Wilderness Conference for People and Nature
Saturday, March 3, 2007
8:30 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.
Northeastern Illinois University
5500 N. St. Louis Ave.
Chicago
For more information, go online at www.habitatproject.org/wildthings or call (847) 965-9239 ext. 21

By creating his or her own native garden, one becomes a part of the regional landscape and an agent who is conserving our natural Midwestern habitat. But is that enough? It's more than enough, Thill said.

"If every homeowner planted one tree or one shrub as a food source," she said, "or put out and maintained one birdbath, development wouldn't have as much impact on the land."

That doesn't sound like too much to ask.

And above all, after all of the classes and the planting, take time to enjoy the fruits of your labor next summer with a glass of tea or a margarita and revel in the flowers and the birds and the bees.