

Backyard Biodiversity

By adopting a few basic principles, your yard can become a sanctuary for wildlife

Yards are personal havens for recreation, rest, and relaxation. As you create habitat that supports birds, butterflies, and other wildlife, you also ensure that your yard remains healthy for you and your family. And by learning about the plants and animals native to your area, you renew your connection with the natural world.

The space around our homes provides us with places to play and relax

To local wildlife, however, expanses of lush, green grass might as well be asphalt. Lawns provide animals with no shade, shelter, or food, and the runoff from fertilizers and pesticides applied to lawns can contaminate wildlife habitats. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that approximately 20 million acres of land in the United States are dedicated to lawns—more than is used for any single crop.

Instead of cultivating a sea of grass, consider incorporating some of the following elements around your home to create a landscape that is not only beautiful but also promotes a variety of animal and insect life:

Plants

- **Go wild.** Convert a section of your lawn to prairie or wildflower meadow. This not only reduces the amount of grass you have to maintain, but also creates more natural space in which local animals and insects may reside. See the links below for details.
- **Choose native varieties.** Native plants are naturally adapted to the local climate, and generally provide the best food and shelter for wildlife with the least amount of maintenance. By contrast, non-native (or invasive) plants can crowd out native varieties and deny local wildlife the habitat they need to survive.
(Visit the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden's Native Plant Nursery)
- **Imitate natural habitats.** Plant in clusters and build overlapping layers of tall trees, small trees, shrubs, and smaller plants
- **Provide food sources.** Plant shrubs and trees that produce fruits and berries for wildlife such as birds and butterflies
- **Create curves.** Because there is a greater amount of biodiversity in the area of transition between habitat types, create a larger transition zone by shaping planting beds with curved or irregular borders

Fencing

Fences can be barriers to wildlife, restricting access to food and shelter

- If you have a tall fence, create some small gaps along the bottom through which animals can pass
- Consider alternatives such as a low rock wall or, better yet, a living fence of trees and shrubs

Both options not only provide wildlife with access, but shade and shelter as well.

Water

Clean, fresh water is important to wildlife, especially birds, insects, and amphibians.

Not all animals can access a tall pedestal birdbath, so consider installing a low, ground-level birdbath or small pond.