

Unlikely Lawn Care Tips

HWEN's resident naturalist shares her tips for attracting wildlife to urban yards

by Joanna Brichetto

My little HWEN yard is shaping up to be its most attractive yet—attractive to wildlife. The goal is to feed, water and shelter as many city creatures as possible, beginning with bugs. Why? Because when we provide safe plants, water



and shelter for insects, we support the entire food web. Pollinators are a “key-stone species group,” upon which all other wildlife depends. Birds, reptiles, amphibians and mammals all need invertebrates in order to survive. As do humans.

Here are some things I've been trying:

A diverse lawn: Our historic lawns in HWEN are naturally diverse. Most of us inherited several kinds of grasses, sedges, mosses and tiny wildflowers galore, even if we call the latter “weeds.” This diversity is good, because even the European plants like dandelion and chickweed feed many animals with nectar, pollen, seeds, leaves and roots.

A shrinking lawn: Every year I add more garden space for native perennials, which function long after blooming. It's a thrill to see warblers pluck insects from fall sunflowers, and to watch goldfinches tug seeds from winter asters.

A lazy lawn: I start mowing late, to let spring ephemerals set seed and to let overwintering insects emerge and mature. Then, I mow only when “necessary,” and with a high blade.

A native lawn: Native plants co-evolved with the animals around them, and thus provide the best-suited food. Some animals only eat from a particular host plant (think Monarchs and milkweeds.) I've replaced invasive exotics like bush honeysuckle, privet, English ivy, periwinkle, and winter-creeper with far more functional redbud, pawpaw, persimmon, spicebush and crossvine.

A messy lawn: One brush pile near the shed taught me that just a few sticks attract ground-feeding birds (like sparrows, doves and towhees). Later, I noticed the pile protected bee nurseries, and gave cover to skinks and garter snakes. I use one stack as a trellis for purple passionvine—the Tennessee state wildflower—which is the host plant for Gulf and Variegated Fritillary butterflies.

A toxin-free lawn: Skip the pesticides and herbicides. Not only are these an unnecessary expense, they do a lot more harm than good when it comes to making your lawn a haven for bugs.

The trial is working. Yard care is cheaper, it doesn't pollute the environment / watershed, and I'm rewarded by seeing all sorts of lifecycles—large and small—in action around me.

Interested in learning more about gardening for wildlife? Here are two places to start:

- *The “Resources” section on Xerces.org, the website of the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation*
- *Garden for Wildlife tips from the National Wildlife Federation (nwf.org/garden-for-wildlife)*