

The Whole World in My Backyard

By Janet Allen

Many years ago, I became more than just a gardener. By creating a habitat garden I became a steward of my own little piece of the earth. Along the way, I've learned to identify songbirds, butterflies, and even dragonflies. As I've strived to restore lost habitat, I've learned to appreciate native plants and learned that there are grasses other than turf grass. But I've also come to understand much about the world beyond my yard. My habitat garden has become a microcosm of the whole world for me.

In order to become certified as a Backyard Wildlife Habitat (since renamed Certified Wildlife Habitat) by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), I provided food, water, cover, and places to raise young for various creatures. Those were the obvious things. But there's also that fine print in the certification requirements: to use earth-friendly gardening practices. I've come to understand that these "extra" requirements are not extra at all. They're vital -- not just for my own yard but for the world beyond.

One important gardening practice is to reduce or eliminate the use of pesticides and herbicides. My plants thrive without using any of these "icides." My diverse and abundant plantings invite into my yard many more beneficial insects than pests. Seeing how easy it is to have a yard full of life without the use of pesticides, I'm heartsick thinking of the harm homeowners cause children, pets, and wildlife by using these poisons. I purchased a "Pesticide Free Yard" sign to display by the roadside. I hope when people see this sign in the midst of my flourishing plants they'll realize how unnecessary these chemicals are.

Chemicals are unnecessary because my gardening practices support life in the soil. I leave leaves on the soil to feed that life. We pile any extra leaves in bins to decompose into leaf humus. We plant enough plants that they "self-mulch." Except for non-native pests such as Japanese beetles, we allow a natural balance of insects.

I've seen the magic of compost in our vegetable garden, too. Who needs chemicals when you have compost? Making compost in indoor worm bins and in outdoor compost bins is one way I recycle waste on my own property. I'm appalled when I see people throwing out food scraps, grass clippings, and fall leaves as if they were garbage! Knowing how valuable this organic matter is, it's distressing to see our town using payloaders to scoop these leaves into huge, polluting dump trucks to cart them away.

Unfortunately my habitat garden was like the world in another way: it had its own invasive plants. Ironically, plants on invasive plants lists, such as Japanese barberry and burning bush, seemed to cause no problem in my own yard. Some of these invasive plants are popular in home gardens precisely because they're carefree and ornamental. At first, it took all my newly-fortified sense of stewardship to dig up and discard these plants solely because they might harm ecosystems beyond my own yard! Now that I've discovered the beauty of a natural landscape using native plants, I don't miss those invasives, and have come to see them as rather gaudy and too-common.

And there are non-native invasive animals, too. One of the most distressing is the house sparrow. I've seen firsthand how destructive these nonnative birds can be. They badger smaller birds and, by their sheer numbers, intimidate larger birds. They take over nestboxes meant for native birds that need these places to raise their young. I see daily evidence of how their presence reduces the diversity of birds in my yard -- and how difficult it is to manage the problem. I better understand the problems caused by invasive species in the world beyond my yard, but I have found no solutions.

A habitat garden should conserve water. After my husband constructed two rain barrels, I was astonished to see how much water collected from just one of our four downspouts. Even a brief rainfall

filled the barrels to overflowing. I realized how much our own impervious roof and driveway must be contributing to our overburdened municipal sewer system. And now I'm keenly aware of how our cities and suburbs are covered with acres of impermeable roofs, driveways, roads, and parking lots.

I decided to add a further conservation element to my habitat garden – a clothesline. As I take action in my personal life to prevent further climate change, my clothesline has become an essential energy-saving component of my yard.

A few years after starting our habitat garden, we built a pond and stream, adding a whole new ecosystem to my habitat. I've enjoyed immensely learning about native aquatic plants, seeing the little water bugs, and watching the wildlife attracted to the pond. At the same time, though, I'm keenly aware that the pond's pump, though one of the most efficient available, is using electricity. I improved my habitat garden by adding this water feature, but does this justify its extravagant energy use? Coincidentally, though, my state's utility companies began offering a renewable energy option the same month I plugged in my pond! I assuaged my guilt somewhat by being one of the first to sign up to purchase 100% clean, renewable wind energy. But I now identify even more strongly with the kinds of difficult decisions we need to make on a national level regarding energy policies. And my second pond was designed simply as a wildlife pond, with no pump at all.

Over the past years, I've given a lot to my habitat garden. I've studied books. I've dug holes. I've lugged stones. I've searched for sources of native plants. I've dug up and discarded my formerly favored, but now unwelcome exotic invasive plants. But my habitat garden has given much more back to me. It has reconnected me to the natural world, providing much joy and satisfaction. I've met many wonderful people by sharing my excitement about my yard. But the greatest gift of all has been the spiritual value of the natural world.

Creating my habitat garden has been one of the most creative, rewarding things I've done. I feel a strong sense of stewardship for all the creatures that visit my yard. I can provide for their simple needs in my own yard, but what about the world beyond my yard? What will happen to my monarch butterflies when they leave my yard. Will there be enough nectar to sustain them on their long journey to Mexico? Will my hummingbirds find a winter home when so much rainforest is being cut down? Will pesticides kill my busy bees when they travel down the street?

And so my habitat garden leads me out of my yard, out into the world. It has taught me much about the natural world, but most of all it has inspired an intense sense of stewardship of the world beyond my yard.

It has led me to work with others to form the Habitat Gardening in Central New York Wild Ones chapter. It has led to my work as an advocate for a world where fewer chemicals are used, where we value our natural resources and ecosystems, and where we make clean renewable energy a priority. My hope is that the world outside my yard will adopt the principles of Wild Ones and of the NWF's Certified Wildlife Habitat program ... and that my grandchildren will someday have the opportunity to enjoy their own habitat gardens growing in a healthy planet!

More information about My Stewardship Garden is at www.ourhabitatgarden.org.

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