No Small Matter—
Landscape as Habitat

IN THE GARDEN for January 2014 by Karma Larsen, Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

What we do in our home landscapes matters. Not just to us and to our neighbors but to a much larger, though largely invisible, community. More than 95 percent of the land in the United States has been developed for agriculture, cities, suburbs and other development. Because of that, wildlife and pollinators are more dependent than ever on the choices we make in our backyards.

Thankfully, many of the choices we make for our own pleasure are as beneficial to other organisms as they are to us. We want plants with more than one ornamental quality and more than one season of interest. We want a variety of plants, heights, textures and colors. We want birds and butterflies in our yard. We want shelter from heat, cold and wind for our homes. And we want pollinators for our vegetables and fruit trees since more than 30 percent of what we eat is the direct result of pollination. All of these things, even though they may be primarily an aesthetic choice for us, are crucial to wildlife as well.

Habitat is defined as “a combination of food, water, shelter and space arranged to meet the needs of wildlife.” Even the smallest yard can attract butterflies, birds, beneficial insects and smaller animals. Larger plants like trees and shrubs are the backbone of any landscape design, and they provide much-needed shelter and food for wildlife. Tall native grasses also are important for both shelter and food.

Small choices, like planting a native tree rather than a non-native, can dramatically increase its usefulness to wildlife. A native dogwood, for example, provides food to a hundred or more native moths and butterflies than a dogwood from China.

Here are some plant and landscape recommendations for a wildlife-friendly yard:

- Let plants go to seed. Seeds are an important late winter food source for many animals.
- A yard thoroughly cleaned of debris through mowing, raking and cutting back perennials offers little in the way of shelter or sustenance.
- An amazing range of wildlife overwinters in leaf litter—birds, butterflies, moths, frogs, toads, spiders and other insects, etc. Many birds prefer habitat that is on or near the ground.
- There is no better natural cover than evergreens for birds and other wildlife, and they’re especially helpful around feeders. If there aren’t any evergreens nearby, even potted evergreens can provide some shelter.
- Insects are the primary food source for many birds, so include plants that feed beneficial insects and you’ll attract birds as well.
- One of the main reasons for feeding birds is so that you can enjoy watching them. If you move bird feeders and birdbaths closer to the house, you will be able to watch them without disturbing them.
- Running water can be heard from a considerable distance and can draw in even migrating birds for a visit.
- If birds are flying into windows, reflections can be minimized by using netting or screening over windows or hanging streamers where birds will veer away from them. (Pulling drapes closed actually increases outside reflections, besides taking away the pleasure of bird-watching.)

Find more on attracting wildlife at: http://lancaster.unl.edu/acrageguide/wildlife.shtml and http://www.nebraskawildlife.org/conservation.html