



MAKE HABITAT A HABIT

BED & BREAKFAST FOR BIRDS AND BUTTERFLIES

By Barbara Caswell



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It's autumn, and little waves of papery leaves are piling up against the fence. In my garden, Buck the duck is once again wearing his best iridescent plumage, and scaly or furry, everyone outdoors is diving underground, preparing for the cold nights which have not yet come.

Garden magazines always tell me to get busy now and do some planting. I find it difficult to follow these instructions, since nurseries stop carrying as much plant material. In addition to that, we live on a Sonoma County prairie, where open exposure destroys baby plantings during the winter chill. Fall may be for planting or just for prep, but now is the time to lay out the space for next year's new habitat area, which literally will bring life to your garden.

Whether you have a suburban backyard or an acre of plantings, one of the easiest features to fit in is the native plant border. Borders or hedgerows can be any size, but garden perimeters usually need a softening edging. The variety of heights looks pleasing, and at the same time provides the layering needed for successful foraging and nesting of wildlife.

● *Plan its location with your wildlife fondness or fearfulness in mind.*

From a wild point of view, the farther from human habitation the better. But from your point of view, flowering shrubs close to a prominent window might be great, so that next summer you can admire fluttering nectar drinkers while you load the dishwasher. We got some chuckles out of last summer's favorite humming-



Even with limited space, most gardeners can replicate a portion of Nancy Bauer's lush habitat garden design, mixing edibles such as espaliered apples with native plants that attract natural pollinators.

bird, when he zoomed in several times for a close up of my daughter's colorful hair treatments, taking place on a back porch! Those who fear bees should keep flowers at the far fenceline.

● *Don't give up because of space limitations.*

Every little bit helps provide food and shelter for wildlife, or at least provides a snack for a pollinator traveling successfully through your yard. All living things need water, but it needn't be a lot.

● *To clear a space for planting, consider simple sheet mulching.*

We've used newspaper for years, (the fate of the Chronicle at our house), where we lay down thick sections opened and overlapping. We flatten the sheets by soaking with the hose and cover with 4 inches of mulch. Eventually the paper breaks down and reverts to something that looks like dark, leafy mummy wrappings. If a piece pops up because of raccoons poking about, we just pick that part out, but it cuts down on weeding.

● *Beneficial insects start their lives in forms that are difficult to recognize.*

In theory everybody knows that the desirable butterfly begins as a caterpillar, but isn't it tempting to spray a bush with a caterpillar on it? Pesticides rarely accomplish anything long-term anyway: pest insects aren't on the extinct list, despite widespread use of chemicals for decades! Helpful ladybugs have an entirely different form in their youths, (so did I!), and the mosquito-eating dragonfly begins life as a weird little nymph swimming around underwater. So don't be quick to squash everything that wiggles. You will need caterpillar food plants as well as nectar plants for your best success.

● *Don't forget: mammals, reptiles and amphibians will also increase as your habitat garden provides a feast of life.*

Be prepared for them to visit at night by securely screening off any potential den sites around the base of your house.



There's nothing like advice from someone who's already accomplished what we'd all like to have done! The Bay Area has plenty of model habitat gardens to view, and it's important to see what individual plants look like out of season. They all look good during growing time . . . but at home you live with them year round.

In Santa Rosa, *The Harvest for the Hungry Garden* is open to view, and it includes a habitat garden. The habitat planner, Nancy Bauer, is a master gardener as well as an accomplished writer. Ms. Bauer's *The Habitat Garden Book*, from Coyote Ridge Press, colorful and pretty enough to buy for gifts, offers practical local advice, as it is written specifically for the San Francisco Bay Area.

She recommends "a general (and flexible) habitat formula: 1/3 natives, 1/3 ornamentals, and 1/3 edible plants (fruit and nut trees, herbs, vegetables, berries)." I like this suggestion, because not everyone can be a purist about native plants, although natives do offer special advantages: they provide the correct food at the right times of year to native wildlife, and for obvious reasons, they have great survival rates!

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Using guides like Ms. Bauer's, and visiting native plant nurseries, you can fill your list of necessary "feeder" plants with things you like. If you prefer the look of a traditional English border, you can follow their layout maps, simply replacing those patches with drifts of habitat plants positioned with the tall groupings in the back and shorter edgings toward the front.

Barbara Caswell, the owner of *Designs of the Times*, is the Sonoma County home and garden designer who created Haverfield Park. Her home is a nostalgic country estate with a showcase quality house in a private natural setting.

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