



MAKE HABITAT A HABIT

THE WILDLIFE POND AU NATUREL

By Barbara Caswell



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All life springs from water, as we have been reminded by exciting news from Mars, and so for a habitat to support living things, a water feature is among the most important. Homeowners love the look, and imagine the relief a refreshing pool of water provides to weary wild travelers, struggling to find a place on earth where they are still welcome!

Rainwater both enters and leaves your property, and an engineer should calculate this quantity, if you are contemplating a dry creek. Ponds will overflow at times, and should follow natural drainage patterns, so that new

watercourses don't appear on neighboring properties. An uphill pond should not leak onto another property. Kathy Biggs of *Azalea Wildlife Pond Consulting* in Sebastopol cautions country property owners to avoid collecting water that may be draining too near a septic system. Water can be circulated through a plant-filled creek, to filter out nitrates.

Because ponds represent such a large investment, get advice from someone who's already walked in the primordial ooze! Ms. Biggs had a swimming pool pit that she has converted into a pond, and you can see



PHOTO COMPOSITE © BARBARA CASWELL

Pond owners are rewarded with unusual sights! I was too slow with the camera, so I had to recreate this image with my computer, but I saw exactly this. During a sweltering hot spell last fall, there was something small in our pond, and with binoculars, I saw only the head of a large hawk, as he calmly walked about up to his neck in water, swiveling his fierce face about.

it at www.bignestpond.net, along with a handy native plant list. She also is the author of *Common Dragonflies of California* and the new *Common Dragonflies of the Southwest*, both published by Azalea Creek Press.



DIFFERENCES BETWEEN A TYPICAL TROPICAL POND AND AN EARTH-ENHANCING WILDLIFE POND:

● *An Open Mindset.*

Unless your garden is an enclosed greenhouse, it will be a part of the outdoors where natural things live and eat. (In this case, each other.) In a wildlife pond, if you have a favorite fish named “Spot,” your friendship may be brief!

● *Use of Bay Area natives.*

Both the native plants and animals in your area have been together for a long time, and they will all work together, as long as you have realistic expectations. Raccoons are intelligent and curious, and they will investigate new plantings, but generally, native plants will survive their attentions.

● *Wildlife-friendly placement.*

You will see more creatures if they can't see you, or only see you through a window, and they feel safer with hiding places. But be fair to yourself too — your pond will get better care if you can see and enjoy it.

● *A natural perimeter.*

Your pond needs a beach! Young animals, such as fawns, aren't yet strong swimmers, and must be able to walk out of the pond. Saturated wood provides an environment for “good eggs,” so a snaggy log half in the water makes a design element as well as a transition for plants and microscopic friends. The object is to make tiny homes for frogs, salamanders and nymphs, so use a variety of textures: a stony area for a butterfly mineral lick, a boggy place, some drooping grasses and both sun and shade if possible.

● *A partially covered surface.*

An approximate shade cover of 2/3 surface plants or shadows will control algae, leaving the remaining water

It's important to respect nature's harsh balance, and not get too attached to only one individual, or only one favorite species.

sparkling. Another 1/3 area of underwater plants makes shelter for desirable small life forms. As with all habitat landscaping, it's fine to clean up a little, but very damaging (as well as futile!) to try to sterilize the whole outdoors.

● *Use of native species.*

Bullfrogs, carp and goldfish eat the very animals you are trying to encourage, so be cautious about introducing a new creature. Just because something might survive in your pond doesn't mean you should put him in there! Rocky hiding places will protect the young and the swift, so that only the strong survive.

● *Considerate cleaning.*

Clean up in the chilly early mornings, when tadpoles and dragonfly nymphs are still in the depths. You can hose off leaves in a screen to return nymphs to the water to keep those mosquito eaters alive and well. Ms. Biggs' first choice for mosquito control is non-toxic dunks. For fish, she prefers the native stickleback to the non-native mosquito fish given out by the Mosquito Abatement Board, because they may eat eggs. But . . . we have those in our pond and are inundated with dragonflies and frogs of all kinds. So maybe all the results aren't in yet!

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.

FOR WILDLIFE ADVICE OR RESCUE CALL
SONOMA COUNTY WILDLIFE RESCUE AT:
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FOR WILDLIFE RESCUE VOLUNTEER SIGN-UPS CALL
SONOMA COUNTY WILDLIFE RESCUE'S BUSINESS LINE AT:
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FOR DOMESTIC ANIMAL EMERGENCIES IN PETALUMA'S
CITY LIMIT AREA CALL PETALUMA ANIMAL CONTROL AT:
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