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Backyard Conservation Tip: include wildlife in your gardening plans

(AMHERST, Mass.) Now that summer is here, backyard enthusiasts are in the midst of another gardening season. Whether your backyard is a lively neighborhood gathering spot, a quiet retreat, or a botanical showpiece, the sounds of birdsongs, the sight of butterflies and the benefit of mosquito-eating insects are a welcome addition to any yard.

The Massachusetts state office of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is offering tips and resources to homeowners who want to encourage birds, butterflies and other wildlife and practice "Backyard Conservation" in their own backyards.

A free booklet entitled "Backyard Conservation: Bringing Conservation from the Countryside to Your Backyard" is available by calling toll-free 1-888-LANDCARE. A series of Backyard Conservation tip sheets on environmentally sound gardening techniques may also be downloaded at www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov/homeowners.html.

When planning to incorporate the needs of wildlife into your landscaping, consider both the horizontal area (the size of your lot) as well as the vertical area (the height of your lot from the soil to the highest treetops). Different wildlife species live in each of these zones, so numerous habitats can be provided on a small piece of land.

Trees and shrubs are the backbone of any landscaping design and provide important wildlife shelter and food sources. The addition of flowers, birdhouses, ponds and feeders to your landscape design provides an infinite number of design possibilities.

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Plant a variety of tree species for shelter and food, including evergreens and fruit or nut-bearing plants and whenever possible use native species (they are not only familiar to wildlife, they are best adapted to the New England soil and climate).

Add color to your yard with grasses, wildflowers, and flowering annuals and perennials, which attract birds and butterflies.

All bird species have specific nesting requirements. Because of these requirements, your yard may not accommodate certain species. For instance, Eastern bluebirds prefer nesting sites that border open fields or lawns with a tree or fence post nearby to provide feeding perches and chickadees prefer to nest in brushy wooded areas.

Unlike many other species of birds, hummingbirds rely on nectar as their source of food. These tiny, migratory birds are commonly seen in the summer in northern states gathering nectar from colorful flowers. Hummingbirds are typically attracted to red and yellow tubular flowers, although they frequently visit others.

Few yards will be able to supply sufficient food or shelter for a variety of birds all year long. However, you can improve shelter and food supplies by building or purchasing feeders and houses, and by setting out certain foods.

Butterflies require food in liquid form such as plant-produced nectar. They get some of it from flowers and from juices of extra-ripe fruit. The types of flowering plants you grow will determine the kinds of butterflies you attract to your backyard. Many of the plants that attract hummingbirds, also attract butterflies. In addition, the butterfly bush is especially appealing. Find out what species are common in your area and use plants they like. Nectar feeders can be placed in the yard to attract butterflies. Do not use insecticides near plants for butterflies.

So, do some research on the birds, butterflies and other wildlife that you would like to attract. The USDA-NRCS website is a good place to start. And, don't become overwhelmed...not all planting needs to be done at once. You'll be amazed at how a few simple changes can effectively enhance the existing habitat.