

Container Habitat Gardens

Habitat gardens are very popular and it is possible to bring in a bit of nature to a small space, such as a container garden. Investing in a habitat garden requires a bit of planning and research, but the rewards are pretty special as we get to watch wildlife up close.

Decide what critters you want to support, and do a bit of research to see what plant materials are known to be food sources for the various stages of growth and what you may need to do to provide shelter and water. Our web page, <http://hidalgo-tx.tamu.edu> has a list of plants with comments about the wildlife they support. Click on Horticulture and Landscape, then on Landscape Plant List. Remember that you will need food year round. This may give you an opportunity to add some native grasses to the plant mix. The Valley Nature Center in Weslaco and our Birding Centers all have a wealth of information about habitat gardening.

The availability of small garden fountains or bird baths make supplying water relatively easy. Note that smooth surfaces are not something that birds can stand on and, although you can find something very pretty in the way of glass or ceramic bird baths, it needs to be practical for birds or butterflies to use. Add rocks, especially some that are rough, and keep the water shallow, about one inch or so, where it is safe for wildlife. Water dripping, slowly, can be heard from far away and bring in the birds.

Providing shelter from predators, like hawks, is important for birds and for butterflies and caterpillars. Yes, the baby butterfly stage (or caterpillar) will also need to be supported with food and shelter too. I have a friend who kept losing her monarch chrysalis to birds. She installed a partial sheet of lattice, near the area where the caterpillars were feeding and a bit closer to the wall of her home. The caterpillars quickly adapted and moved behind the lattice when forming their chrysalis and the lattice discouraged the birds. Keep the cat inside or put a bell on its neck, as they are major predators and make sure that the dog learns his manners, too.

Some small trees, or shrubs that can be shaped as trees, and serve wildlife well are: Guajillo, *Acacia berlandieri*, blooms November - March and is an important source of nectar for honey. Its spines are not too large. Spiny plants in containers can be dangerous when we need to move them, so I am going to avoid recommending too many. Another spiny plant that is worth the trouble is Tenaza, *Havardia pallens*, which flowers May - August. Chapote, also known as Mexican Persimmon, *Diospyros texana*, is a small tree, flowering in spring or summer, and it produces a black berry that is enjoyed by several bird species. (It also makes excellent fruit bread for humans!) The male and female flowers are on separate plants, so careful, you do want the females to get this wonderful fruit. Jopoy, *Esenbeckia berlandieri*, a once very rare plant is now available at stores that carry natives. It provides flowers during our long hot summers. This slow growing tree is small and easily grown in a container. Next week I will

mention some non-native "trees" for containers and begin that lengthy list of shrubs.

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