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Friendly Habitat Gardens

Looking for ways to attract more wildlife to your garden? Would you want to have your garden become a Certified Wildlife Habitat? Knowing which plants support wildlife is not all that is necessary to create a habitat garden. To keep native birds and butterflies coming back, we need offer more than one nectar plant or a bit of seed in a feeder. In the same manner as we need food, shelter and clothing, wildlife needs a bit more too. Adding a water element is important, especially if the water can make a bit of noise. Birds can hear the noise of water from blocks away and will rush over for a drink. Establish a water feature that has a drip to it, something with a copper pipe above a bird bath or scooped out rock works well. Water that falls over rocks is also good as long as the basin is not too deep. We don't want to drown any baby birds! Keep it shallow and make sure that the area where birds will stand is rough enough for their tiny feet to get a grip. Fancy glazed ceramic bird baths are not practical. If this is what you have to work with, then add rough rocks to the bottom to provide a grip.

Other features to a habitat garden is a place to hide and a safe place to rear young. A stack of small branches or brush pile works for hiding, as does a stack of lumber for a fire place. You can also plant native thorny shrubs to provide a safe haven. Some birds need to walk on bare ground (not turf grass). So, when planning a garden, be sure to mulch some areas and leave some bare ground near the brush pile. Keep a bit of dusty ground space, free of weeds, just for the birds who enjoy dust baths. You will be amazed at the number of birds that find your spot. Keep the cat indoors or, at the very least, put a bell on their collar to warn the birds of their approach. If your neighbor's cat finds your spot tempting, speak to the neighbor politely and explain what you are wanting to do for wildlife. Perhaps they will cooperate. If not, you can always scatter cut branches of thorny shrubs to keep cats and dogs away. One bloody nose from a thorn will be a reminder not to go there again.

Habitat Certification, under the Best of Texas program (a State and National program), requires a listing of all trees, shrubs, flowers and grasses, water features and hiding spots that support wildlife. You also need to include photos or a drawing with your application fee of \$30.00. Call our office for a copy of the form at (956) 383-1026, or go on the website for Texas Parks and Wildlife at: www.tpwd.state.tx.us. Once you are at this site, type in "habitat certification" and click on the Best of Texas program.

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