

Sonora Area Wildlife Gardens Thrive

Perhaps you've heard—the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) encourages and recognizes “backyard” gardens that support local wildlife. This past March, the Master Gardener Demonstration Garden at Cassina High School, near downtown Sonora, was recognized as NWF Certified Habitat Garden No. 98,446. In September, NWF announced their 100,000th Certified Garden nationwide.

With more than 100,000 Certified Gardens, I wondered how many such gardens are in Tuolumne County. After querying members of local Audubon and California Native Plant Society chapters, the Tuolumne County Garden Club, and County Master Gardeners, I identified twelve Certified Gardens in addition to the Master Gardeners' Demonstration Garden and my own garden near Sonora.

NWF launched their Certification Program in 1973. How long have Certifications been held by local gardeners? The earliest was reported by long-time supporters, Jeanne and Larry Bodiford with No. 10,101 for their Yorba Linda garden; the Bodifords have reapplied for certification of their now thoroughly renovated Willow Springs garden. Julie and Brian Quelvog also received Certification for their Phoenix Lake yard twenty years ago. The most recent garden, 111,148, was reported by Linda and John Gookin of Columbia.

WILDLIFE GALORE: What kinds of wildlife are welcomed to these yards? My query produced extensive lists, including abundant birds, toads, frogs, four kinds each of snakes and lizards, butterflies, various other pollinators, and several different mammals both large and small. Additionally, a respondent living near the Junction Shopping Center mentioned the addition of a bat house with bats roosting nearby.

How have people made their gardens wildlife-friendly? The inclusion of water is a powerful draw. Pat Reh of East Sonora added not only ponds and birdbaths, but saucers of water for thirsty insects, amphibians, and birds. Eliminating fertilizers and pesticides, while including composting and brush piles for quail and other animals were also frequently noted. Butterfly and bird feeders; bee blocks; and nesting boxes for nuthatches, bluebirds, tree swallows, titmice, wrens, and wood ducks were also mentioned. Anne Robin of Twin Harte described watching squirrels stand on her deck to reach the hummingbird feeders, tipping them over and drinking from them.

Some respondents discourage deer with fencing; others rely on deer-resistant plants; yet others welcome their presence. Teri, George, and grandson Jacob van Buskirk of Columbia live in an old orchard near the end of the San Diego Ditch. “I shake down the apples for the deer,” Teri said. We've eliminated pesticides and fertilizers over the years and it's “natural,” not overly groomed; “our yard is nearly self-sustaining,” Teri added.

Pat Reh of East Sonora and Dona King of rural Sonora also credit a natural, not overly groomed property.

Ridgewood resident, Joan Bergsund, enjoys the deer as well, saying that she tolerates some of their nibbling; it's “pruning that I won't have to do.” She sometimes sees newly born fawns; “that really stirs my heart,” she added. When an unfortunate bird crashes into her window, Joan gathers it up in a plastic bag, freezes it, and uses it to teach her grandchildren about birds.

Linda Gookin reported treasuring a very old Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus*), an invasive and generally undesirable tree. She and her husband have removed all other Trees of Heaven, but this one stays, says Lin, for it is filled with many nesting holes and “it is heaven for the birds.” Numerous lizards and frogs hide in their rock walls and dense plantings which include xeric and native plants.

What are these gardeners planning next? Many stressed that they already have native plants in their yards, especially oaks, manzanitas, pines, Christmas berry (toyon), and even mountain misery which together provide wildlife food, nesting places, and cover.

Native plants were also the most frequently listed as planned additions. Julie and Brian Quelvog are planning to eliminate their lawn, replacing it with native lupines, iris, columbine, and lilies. Pat Reh targets increasing her native milkweed stand to provide caterpillar food for Monarch butterflies.

The next most frequently reported addition was the inclusion of more water, whether in the form of ponds; fountains; or automatic, water-conserving drip irrigation systems.

WHAT INSPIRES WILDLIFE GARDENERS? Certainly an NWF certification isn't required to be a “real” gardener, wrote a Soulsbyville resident. Even so, the remaining eleven respondents, plus several interested but as of yet non-Certified gardeners, were enthusiastic.

“What motivates people to actually plunk down \$15 and complete an (albeit simple) NWF application describing their garden's attributes? Furthermore, just over half of the respondents purchased an additional NWF Wildlife Garden sign for \$25. Several of these signs have been posted for passersby to see.

“Creating an environment compatible to man and beast” motivated Joan Bergsund to certify her garden. “My love for all wildlife; they are all my friends!” added Dona King of rural Sonora. “To stay physically fit and to maintain a subdivision home for amphibians as long as possible—15 years so far,” said Pat Reh.

Linda Gookin wrote, “I think it is important to share with others our commitment to wildlife and hopefully encourage others to do the same. Educating our grandchildren about wildlife and helping instill in them an appreciation and need for stewardship (is important),” she added.

Concluded Anne Robin, “I feel like I can give back of a little of what has been taken away from the environment by providing food, water, and shelter for the critters. After all, I moved into their territory... (I) wanted to show others how easy it is to make wildlife comfortable in your yard.”

To learn more about NWF's Certification program, visit <http://www.nwf.org/backyard/certify.cfm> or call 1-800-822-9919.

To help restore their Sonora-area garden to a more natural state, Master Gardener Vera Strader and husband, Dan, are nurturing over 100 young oaks and toyons.