

Wildlife Gardens Revisited

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The **Master Gardener/Cassina High School Demonstration Garden** attained **Wildlife Habitat Certification** from the **National Wildlife Federation** (NWF) in March of last year. How is local wildlife reacting to their new home near downtown Sonora, just a few blocks from business district hustle and bustle?

On a recent, sizzling July morning, I sat quietly listening to the buzzes and chirps of a burgeoning wildlife community. The garden's occupants were intently gathering food for themselves and for their young. **Phoebes and flycatchers** swooped from above to snatch airborne insects, returning with full bills to hidden treetop nests. A **California Towhee** mined the mulch for bugly morsels while a lizard scurried near the small water pond and an **Anna's Hummingbird** explored the native penstemons.

The insects however provided the real action. **Bees and small flies** buzzed among the cone flowers (*Echinacea*), their legs and pollen baskets swollen with bright yellow pollen. **Beneficial wasps** flitted among the red clarkia flowers, and the squash blossoms were circled by aphid-hunting and pollinating **hover flies**. **Bumblebees** tumbled in the California poppies.

It takes time for diverse wildlife to become comfortable in a new habitat garden. Insects are the essential foundation, necessary for pollinating, controlling other insects, and providing food for countless larger critters.

Certified gardens must provide food, water, cover, places to raise young and minimal or no toxic pesticides. Most insect infestations require no action at all, for the intruders will be controlled by a garden's wildlife—other insects, birds, amphibians, etc. However, this spring an especially stubborn aphid infestation in the Demo Garden's roses merited an organic spray of water, vegetable oil, and dish soap.

In addition to the dozen area gardens described in an earlier column (http://cetuolumne.ucdavis.edu/newsletterfiles/Master_Gardener_Articles_200815475.pdf), **at least three new yards have joined the ranks of Certified Wildlife Gardens.**

- Fran Steen of East Sonora writes that the **wildlife** in her yard is **a source of great satisfaction**. Her garden features both dry areas and a moist creek-side setting for diverse creatures including deer, birds, raccoons, and fox. This spring, lady bugs and lacewings pitched in to help manage the aphids. With time, Fran plans to further support her garden's occupants with the addition of more native plants.
- **A fountain** in Alexis Halstead's East Sonora garden **provides water for birds, toads, frogs, and lizards** with occasional sightings of bobtail cats and a snake or two. The birds and lizards help maintain her vegetable garden by keeping the

insect population down. She composts all kitchen and yard waste and also adds purchased turkey compost to the soil. Alexis says she is “one of the Native Plant Society’s best customers,” with native plants helping create a “natural-looking environment with lots of diversity.” Alexis posts her NWF Backyard Habitat sign on their front gate.

- Sandy and Ben Smith’s Columbia **garden draws an extensive assortment of wildlife and “can sound like an aviary on most days.”** The Smiths started with a natural setting of native live oak, toyon, ponderosa and gray pine, and manzanita. Additions include more native plants, a fenced vegetable and flower garden with insect-attracting blossoms, and wildlife-essential water in natural-looking rock near the house. Brush piles are home to quail and other creatures while the “bluebird” nesting boxes are occupied by ash-throated flycatchers and titmice.

Sandy surprised Ben with their NWF Wildlife Garden Certification for his birthday last year. The Smiths have now obtained Certification as a gift for close friends. They post a Certified Habitat Garden sign at the entrance to their driveway.

To learn how to certify your yard, visit www.nwf.org/gardenforwildlife/create.cfm or call NWF at 1-800-822-9918.

Request an e-newsletter with upcoming Master Gardener Demonstration Garden activities, free open Garden dates, and other local garden topics by emailing cbjames@frontiernet.net. The next open garden day is August 1. We hope to see you there.

Vera Strader and her husband, Dan, help sustain local wildlife by minimizing pesticides and adding plentiful bee and butterfly plants to their Sonora yard.