Gardening to Support a Healthy Environment

In our own yards and gardens we can do many simple things to help protect and support birds and beneficial insects such as pollinators. We now know that up to a million species of wildlife are threatened with extinction, due mostly to climate change, pesticide use, and habitat loss through development. The benefit of changing our focus to ecological gardening is a “beautiful garden that provides year-round interest, supports local wildlife, absorbs and filters rainwater, and improves air quality” (from the Native Plant Trust website listed below). And it is thrilling and fascinating to visit a garden that is buzzing and fluttering with a wide diversity of life!

1) Remove invasive plants

**Why** - Invasive plants are vigorous plants that were introduced from other regions or countries and have no local natural predators to keep them in check. They rapidly outgrow and overrun native beneficial plants, robbing our local insects and birds of essential sources of food and shelter. Some invasives such as black swallowwort are toxic to beneficial insects and poisonous to the larvae of monarch butterflies.

**How** - It’s best to remove them by hand, making sure to remove roots. Please see resource section below for information about which plants are invasive in Massachusetts and how to deal with them.

2) Grow native plants

**Why** - The colorful, hardy plants that co-evolved with local birds and insects provide vastly more food and shelter to a much wider diversity of wildlife than plants that were introduced here from other regions and countries—even compared to plants that have been growing here since Europeans brought them hundreds of years ago. Research shows that if we all planted our yards with 70% native plants, we could sustainably support local birds and beneficial insects. See the article about ecological gardening in the resource section below. It’s also important to rethink large developments that destroy wildlife habitat.

**How** - You can start small, just by filling in spaces in your garden or taking back small areas of lawn and planting native plants. The most beneficial plants to add to your garden are the original native species that have not been hybridized. (Native plants don’t have additional names following the Latin name.) See the resource section below for sources of native plants. Consider plants that can handle heat and drought as our summers continue to warm up, especially in the city, and particularly in locations near the street.

3) Avoid use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides

**Why** - They kill pollinators and birds. Plants that have been grown with pesticides are likely to poison the same birds and insects you are trying to protect.

**How** - Do not introduce chemicals into your yard. Buy plants from nurseries that grow their plants without chemicals. If you visit a nursery, ask for pesticide-free native plants. If your favorite nursery does not have native plants, ask them to stock some. Nursery owners will start stocking these plants when they know their customers want them. See resource list for reliable nurseries and local native plant sales.

4) Do not clean up plant material from your yard in the fall

**Why** - Many plants (especially natives) will supply birds with seed through the winter. The dead stalks and leaves provide shelter for native insects (including pollinators) that overwinter in them. If you do a fall clean-up, you are throwing out the eggs that will hatch into the next generation of beneficial insects. Also, the standing stalks and flower heads provide a special kind of beauty through the winter!

**How** - Leave stalks and fallen leaves in place through the winter until the weather is reliably in the 50s in the spring. This means you are waiting until beneficial insects have hatched or awakened in the warm spring weather before you clean up your yard. Fallen leaves can be left on the ground to provide natural and nutritious mulch for your soil.

5) Provide water for birds and insects

**Why** - Birds need water all year long. And, with more frequent summer droughts, natural outdoor water sources dry up.

**How** - Provide a bird bath, or a large plant saucer with pebbles in it (rising above the water level) that bees and birds can stand on. Bees must be able to stand where it’s dry and drink. Place in a sheltered area. Replace water three times a week or more, to avoid mosquitoes, and to keep the level up and the water clean.

6) Reduce (or replace!) your lawn

**Why** - The grasses in our lawns come from other geographic regions, and they provide no ecological benefits to local wildlife. They are often treated with fertilizers that are toxic to humans, insects, and pets. Non-native grasses have shallow root systems that do not soak up rainwater or the toxic run-off that often overflow into rivers and streams, killing water life.

**How** - If you want to keep a lawn, reduce areas of it that you don’t actually use for recreation. Refrain from applying artificial chemicals on your lawn. Keep your mower set at 3 to 4 inches and mow every other week. Water deeply and less frequently. Areas of the lawn that are not used for recreation can be turned into garden areas or planted with low-growing ground covers, including native grasses. See resource section below for more information.

7) Reduce (or replace) outdoor lights

**Why** - Migrating birds and nocturnal insects are disoriented—often fatally—by outdoor lights.

**How** - If you need lighting for safety, consider using motion detector lights or yellow LED bulbs.

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When you take any of these steps, you are helping pollinators, birds, and human health.
Resources for a Healthy Ecological Garden

Articles giving an overview of ecological gardening:
https://portside.org/2020-02-18/how-turn-your-yard-ecological-oasis

Identifying and controlling invasive plants in MA (brochure):
https://www.nativeplanttrust.org/documents/319/Invasive_Brochure_Reduced_File_Size.pdf

Databases for Native Plants for Birds + Pollinators:
For birds: https://www.audubon.org/native-plants (add your zipcode)
For pollinators in the Northeast region: https://xerces.org/publications/plant-lists/pollinator-plants-northeast-region

Sources of native plants for purchase:
A source list: https://grownativemass.org/Great-Resources/nurseries-seed
Native Plant Trust: https://www.nativeplanttrust.org/for-your-garden/buy-native-plants/
Grow Native MA plant sale: https://grownativemass.org/Our-Programs/plant-sale (in Cambridge)
Amanda’s Garden: https://www.amandasnativeplants.com/ (mail order from upstate NY)
Youth Environmental Entrepreneurship Program: https://xerces.org/publications/plant-lists/pollinator-plants-northeast-region

Youth education, native plant sales and installation programs: http://www.meadowmaking.org

General information about growing native plants, including books, articles, classes, videos, lectures, databases, and more:
Grow Native MA website: https://grownativemass.org/
Native Plant Trust website: https://www.nativeplanttrust.org/

Books for getting started:
The Pollinator Victory Garden by Kim Eierman. A practical, comprehensive, easy-to-use guide.
Native Plants for New England Gardens by Mark Richardson and Dan Jaffe. Excellent descriptions of plants and information on how to grow them.

Please join residents in improving local ecosystems by assisting us in certifying each of our communities as a Wildlife Habitat Community. For information (and for any questions), contact:

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