



TEN TIPS FOR CREATING A HOME WILDSCAPE

by LAUREN SIMPSON

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Back in 2015, my family started “wildscaping,” which is simply landscaping with the primary purpose of supporting wildlife. Because I didn’t know anything about wildscaping (or gardening, either!), I found mentors, read voraciously, and experimented in the gardens—learning as much from my mistakes as from my successes. As a result, our home gardens have welcomed a wide variety of wildlife, including 51 species of butterfly!

Here are 10 helpful things I’ve learned on my wildscaping journey:



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- Use native plants. If I could give only one tip, it would be to incorporate plants that are native to your eco-region as much as possible. There are many reasons for this, but one of the most important is that insects often cannot consume plants that they have not co-evolved with because they cannot digest the chemicals in the leaf or pollen. Our gardens should sustain insects because insects provide billions of dollars annually in pollination, pest control, and decomposition eco-services. They are also indispensable to the food web—including for baby birds, the majority of which feed only on insects and other arthropods. Moreover, if an aggressive native plant gets out of your garden, it's fine because it was always in this area. But if a non-native, invasive species that nothing here eats escapes, it can crowd out native plants, leaving less food for our native insects. Because insects are facing devastating challenges, it's our job to help them survive, including in our gardens. So always lean toward using native plants. And when you incorporate non-native plants, always first ensure that they aren't invasive.
- Don't use pesticides. Pesticides might kill those insects eating your plants, but they will also kill many other insects—including those that would keep pests in check naturally. In a healthy garden, predators and parasitoids—many of which are insects themselves—will take care of the pests in our gardens.
- Plant in clusters of species. The more you plant in clusters of individual plant species, the more intentional your garden will look. A good rule of thumb is to plant clusters of odd numbers of a single plant: three, five, seven. You can have multiple clusters of the same species in different parts of the garden. Clustering also serves a biological function. For example, some insects (especially bees) practice “flower constancy,” where they like to feed on the nectar and pollen of a single plant species before moving on to another. So if you give them a cluster of a single plant species, you make their life easier. The same goes for pollen and

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leaf specialist insects, who can digest the leaf or pollen of only those plants in a particular family, genus, or species. By clustering some of your plants in the garden, you might be helping them find the food sources they need more easily.



- Incorporate plants in a variety of colors, shapes, and sizes. Variety is the spice of life, including for insects! This takes several forms. First, you want to ensure that you have something blooming in the garden during all seasons, to feed critters throughout the year. So when you select plants, look for bloom time. Second, you want flowers of different colors because insects see colors differently. For example, bees have a hard time distinguishing red from green, but they can see yellow, white, and purple well. In contrast, hummingbirds and butterflies are particularly drawn to reds. So having an assortment of colors in your garden supports more insects. Third, you want a variety of flower shapes and sizes because insects have a wide range of mouthpart shapes and sizes, and their bodies are bigger or smaller, relative to each other. So the more shapes and sizes of flowers you have, the wider variety of insects you will invite.

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- Plant for the babies. When we think of pollinators, we often think of the adults and what they need to survive—for example, adult butterflies and nectar sources. But insects may eat very different things in their larval stages. So make sure to incorporate plants that feed the larvae, not just the adults. As an example, to support a robust butterfly population, you need not just nectar plants, but plants with leaves the caterpillars can eat (“host plants”).



- Aim for density. Density without overcrowding is a good thing, similar to what we see in our native coastal prairie. For example, dense plantings suppress the growth of weeds underneath. This means less weeding. Plants can also hold each other up better when placed closer together.
- Put plants with similar needs together. Make sure that you plant things that have similar needs for sun, water, and soil in the same area. For example, you don't want to put a plant that wants lots of water beside a plant that doesn't.



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- Think about plant height and layering. Put tall “structural” plants in strategic areas, with medium and low plants around them, to make your garden look intentional. Doing this will also provide a variety of layers to shelter wildlife.
- Use borders. Border your garden beds distinctly. Doing this shows intentional design, which can help the community accept your wildscape.
- Embrace imperfection. Doing less in a wildlife-habitat garden can benefit wildlife. For example, we shouldn't cut back stems over winter. Some native bee species nest in pithy or hollow stems, so that if we cut back dead stems, we might be discarding bee larvae. We should also leave fallen leaves, or collect them and use them instead of mulch. Some wildlife overwinters under leaf cover, and other insects' pupae might be attached to fallen leaves. And we should also avoid mowing over early spring wildflowers because these may be the only food source available to insects coming out of diapause (like hibernation).

NOTE: Lauren can be contacted at [SJCWH website](#) and [FB community](#).