

SUSTAINABLE *gardening*

BY ADOPTING THESE PRACTICES,
LOCAL GREEN SPACES CAN MAKE A
POSITIVE IMPACT FOR THE ENTIRE
PLANET. **BY BRIAN FOLMER**

Our society today is much more aware of our environment. We are exposed to more scientific research and data involving our surroundings — wildlife habitat degradation, global warming, endangered species and climate change are concepts and issues that we are more focused on. As individuals, many of us ask how we can contribute positively to our natural environment. How can we affect positive change?

While it seems like many of our environmental challenges are far-reaching and beyond the scope of our individual resources, there are many ways we can improve our environment through individual actions, and at a local level, by starting with our own outdoor living spaces — our gardens, workspaces and public green spaces.



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Improving the habitat, or living conditions, in these local spaces for birds, butterflies, insects and animals, is a very attainable goal for protecting and improving our environment. This wildlife habitat includes food sources, water sources and shelter from the elements and predators.

Improving and enhancing these elements of our natural environment will help populations of birds, bees, butterflies and other wildlife to survive and thrive in





our local environments. Their health is important to the overall health of the ecosystems we live in and that we depend on for our own food, shelter and health.

Tip 1: Plant native species

Planting native species is a sure way to improve the food source for wildlife, as they have adapted to local plants as a food supply. Adding these plants to your gardens and outdoor environments ensures a greater food source for them.

Desirable native species to consider in the Grey/Bruce region for wildlife food sources include perennials such as butterfly milkweed — a crucial nectar and food source for the monarch butterfly. New England Asters are excellent fall food sources for our Grey/Bruce butterflies facing a long migration to their winter homes. Coreopsis, Boneset and native Liatris and Bee Balm are also good nectar and pollen sources for birds, bees and butterflies.

Black-eyed Susan and native coneflower are excellent winter seed sources for goldfinches, chickadees and other wintering songbirds of our region. Native trees of Grey/Bruce, such as oak, beech, maple and butternut trees, produce acorns, seeds and nuts that are beneficial for

birds as well as mammals like squirrels and chipmunks.

Native fruiting shrubs and trees for our area, including viburnum, dogwood, hawthorn and crabapple, provide food for a wide variety of birds, as well as small mammals. Gray dogwood, in particular, is an excellent choice for birds — over 100 birds eat the fruit of this native shrub. Gray dogwood grows throughout Grey and Bruce counties, in a variety of soil types, and is practical and easy to grow.

Tip 2: Be careful with non-native plant species

You can also go beyond strictly native plants, and include the newer plant species and cultivars grown and marketed by the horticultural industry.

Hailing from Europe, Asia, South America and throughout the world, these non-native plants are often more desirable, with showier flowers than many native plants, a longer bloom period, better foliage colour and other desirable traits. But some of these ‘newcomers’ are not as beneficial to wildlife. For instance, double-blooming plants, while very showy in a garden setting, rarely set seed and have a low nectar content, so they are not a good food source for birds and insects. Plants bred for interesting foliage colours often have decreased bloom production, therefore lacking as a pollen or nectar source for birds, bees and butterflies.

Some introduced plants are aggressive and take over the growing environments of native plants and are called invasive. Periwinkle, goutweed, and English ivy are examples of non-native plants that were introduced to our outdoor spaces for their aesthetic value and have become invasive in local ravines and forests.

Periwinkle in particular is invading forest edges in Grey/Bruce in a number of locations, spreading to natural areas and diminishing their value for wildlife habitat. Purple loosestrife is another invasive type seen throughout Grey/Bruce wetlands and watercourses, displacing native species.

In spite of this, many introduced plants have excellent pollen and nectar production and many set heavy seed and fruit crops, so it is important for those of us wanting to improve the outdoor environment to be aware of both

the benefits and limitations of non-native plants as wildlife habitat providers. Choose new plants wisely, and rely on local sources of information for advice and expertise.

Tip 3: Water sources are important

The presence of water in some form is very beneficial to all types of wildlife. Ponds, streams and lakes are the natural water sources for a host of wildlife. For the average person with limited space and resources, a simple birdbath will entice birds to come to your outdoor space to drink and bathe.

Locating it near some evergreen trees allows for a staging area for the birds — they can land in the evergreen branches with cover from predators while they scope out the invitation of a drink on a hot day. Butterflies and dragonflies will also be attracted to bird baths.

More ambitious water sources such as small garden ponds

provide amphibious habitat for frogs, salamanders and a host of insect life. The larger the size, the more diversity of wildlife you can attract and foster.

Rain gardens are another water-based option to improve wildlife habitat. These are property swales and depressions used to temporarily store and percolate rainwater into the soil to prevent erosion and replenish groundwater. Planted with selected plant species that can withstand flooding, they both help the environment through the previously stated ways, and the planting of high nectar, seed and fruit producing plants increases the wildlife habitat value of this garden.

Tip 4: Add shelter

Shelter is also crucial for wildlife habitat. Trees, both evergreen and deciduous, are very important. They provide perching, resting and hiding spaces, as well as nesting areas for birds and small mammals. Shrubs and



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hedges also serve as shelter, while perennial plants and ornamental grasses provide excellent nesting materials.

Improving wildlife habitat can be as simple and attainable as judiciously locating a birdbath in your garden, or planting more nectar and pollen-rich plants in your flower beds. Volunteering to plant trees and shrubs in your local park or green space also provides shelter as a food source, further enhancing the environment for wildlife.

If you own property in Grey or Bruce with larger outdoor spaces, consider setting aside an area to naturalize with native plants for further shelter and food source options. Conservation tree plantings and windbreaks are also suitable to larger outdoor spaces. But even small scale patio pots on a balcony and a dish of water can have an impact.

Saving the monarch butterfly

The measurable effects of improving your local environment can be related to the plight of the monarch butterfly. Once common throughout North America, and a harbinger of summer here in Grey/Bruce, populations have declined to the point that it is now considered a threatened species.

Habitat loss through destruction of the monarch butterfly’s prime food source, the milkweed plant, has contributed to its decline. Widespread efforts in recent years by farmers, landowners, local garden groups and home gardeners have led to a concerted effort to replant milkweed. The Butterfly Gardens of Saugeen Shores (www.butterflygardensofss.ca) is a good example of a collaborative local effort to improve monarch butterfly habitat.

Anecdotally, we are seeing many visitors to our garden centre asking for butterfly milkweed and other pollinator-friendly plants to add to their gardens to help in the recovery of the monarchs. Visitors touring our botanical gardens are also showing increased interest in our butterfly and native pollinator plants display garden areas to learn what they can plant here in Grey/Bruce to help monarch butterflies and other pollinators.

Monarch populations have recently gone up, and researchers attribute this population rebound in part to these efforts. Working at the local level can make positive change on a national or international scale. Wildlife habitat improvements and benefits are attainable for the average person wishing to make an improvement in their local outdoor environment.

Local garden centres, horticultural societies, conservation authorities and your neighbourhood library are further sources of information to improve your outdoor environment. Consider a Rural Gardens of Grey Bruce garden tour (www.ruralgardens.ca) as another source of local knowledge in your journey to improve your outdoor living space for wildlife.

Small-scale backyard activities can have measurable impacts at both the local level and beyond. This spring, enjoy your outdoor living environments with an eye to how you can enhance and improve them, creating a better environment for us all. ■

Brian Folmer, BLA, is owner of Folmer Landscaping, Garden Centre and Botanical Gardens in Walkerton. Learn more at www.folmergardens.com.



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