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Build a backyard habitat to attract beneficial wildlife

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NEWS RELEASE

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BUILD A BACKYARD HABITAT TO ATTRACT BENEFICIAL WILDLIFE

By Patia Stephens
University Relations

MISSOULA--

Multicolored butterflies fluttering from flower to flower in your backyard. Song sparrows and bluebirds and yellow-rumped warblers serenading under your window. Frogs frolicking in your pond.

Attracting such wildlife to your yard is easy, says Lisa Mills, program director of the Montana Natural History Center.

The Center, in partnership with the National Wildlife Federation, provides information on backyard, schoolyard and workplace wildlife habitats.

"Creating a backyard habitat is a great way to join the hobbies of gardening and wildlife viewing," Mills said. "It adds beauty, and it's fun to watch wildlife coming into your yard. It's free entertainment."

Backyard habitats provide crucial sustenance for species that are on the decline due to habitat loss, pesticides and predation. All it takes is attention to the four basic elements wildlife need to survive: food, water, cover and places to raise young.

"The more standard approach to landscape is a desert for most wildlife," Mills said. "You might get deer coming in to eat your pansies. But anyone can provide plantings that are

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good for other wildlife you may want to attract."

Some common garden plants do nurture wild creatures. For example, lilac, lavender and cosmos feed butterflies with their nectar. Sunflower seeds and berries of all kinds nourish birds.

Plants that are native to Montana and the Rocky Mountains, however, are custom-designed for the critters that evolved with them.

"For example, wild rose bushes attract butterflies and birds -- and they're really beautiful," she said. "Butterflies love prairie coneflower, or echinacea. Lupines -- both native and cultivated -- are wonderful for butterflies."

Other nectar-rich native blossoms for butterflies include asters, bee balm, milkweed (this is the only food source for monarchs), phlox, penstemons and sage.

For birds, think nuts and berries.

"Rocky Mountain juniper has berries that stay on in the winter, which is great for the birds that winter here. They have a tough go of it," she said. "Plus, it's an evergreen, so it provides cover and stays green all winter. Sumac also keeps its berries until late in winter.

"Pine cones have nuts that will help feed nuthatches, chickadees and red crossbills."

More bird-friendly plantings include chokecherry, elderberry, honeysuckle, serviceberry and wild strawberry.

According to the NWF, native plants may support 10 to 50 times as many species of wildlife as non-native plants. And since they are adapted to local soils, climate and pests, native plants have the added benefit of requiring less water, pruning, and chemical fertilizers and pesticides. They also may co-exist more peacefully with deer than those pansies.

"A lot of these native plants have evolved with deer, so they can handle browsing or

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even repel the deer," she said. "For example, sage is a beautiful landscaping plant, but deer don't like to eat it."

Besides planting, consider offering a water source.

"Birds will be attracted if you put in a pond or fountain, especially one with running water," she said. "Put it in a slightly covered place, but not where cats can stalk them."

Don't have room for a pond or fountain? Try a shallow, water-filled dish. And don't be surprised if amphibian guests join the party.

Other tactics for helping wildlife include providing cover such as brush, rock and wood piles, and nesting places like birdhouses, bat boxes and hollow logs.

Mills encouraged gardeners to ease into building a backyard habitat. "Start simple, do a little research, make a plan," she said.

Books on creating wildlife habitat are available for checkout from the Montana Natural History Center library, and may also be available at public libraries throughout Western Montana. The NWF's Web site, at <http://www.nwf.org/habitats/>, offers both basic and in-depth advice. Information packets about the NWF's Backyard Wildlife Habitat certification program are available by calling their local office at 721-6705.

MNHC and NWF will offer a Habitat Stewards Training Program in September for those interested in learning more about building wildlife habitats. The workshop will include speakers and in-depth field experiences.

For more information, contact Lisa Mills at 327-0405 or e-mail mnhc@selway.umt.edu.

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