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## HOME-GARDEN

# Gardening Central Mass.: Using your garden to create a habitat for wildlife

**Liz Nye** Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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Last summer, several horseweed plants took up residence in the roofline gutter of my house. Horseweed (*Erigeron canadensis*) is a tall, leggy plant that branches into small flowers at the top. When the plants went to seed, their long, dry stems flopped over out of the gutter to dangle unattractively in front of my windows. I'm not sure if my neighbors took notice, but the birds did. Throughout the fall, I've seen tufted titmouse fly up to the dry flower seed heads to grab a quick snack. While I should probably consider better gutter maintenance, part of me loves the dried horseweed hanging from my roof because it reminds me that I share my space with wildlife.

The movement to “rewild” yards and cultivate more naturalistic spaces through home gardening continues to gain momentum in reaction to the ways human-caused climate change and the biodiversity crisis are reshaping the world we know. For many, supporting the local ecosystem by fostering space for wildlife in home gardens can feel like an act of resistance.

Gardens that support wildlife create habitat — they offer food, water, cover, and places for animals to raise young. Plants provide just about all of these things, but what plants and how you use them matters.

## Choose plants appropriate to the ecoregion

Ecoregions, developed in the 1980s as a method for understanding and selecting native plants, describe areas where ecosystems, climate, geology, and hydrology are all generally similar. Massachusetts is part of the ecoregion known as the Northeastern Coastal Zone, an area spanning most of southern New England.

By choosing plants native to the ecoregion, gardeners help preserve important relationships between plants and animals that have evolved over millennia. Most insect herbivores, as famed entomologist and native plant advocate Doug Tallamy discusses, are specialists only able to digest the leaves of specific plants they have co-evolved with. This means many ornamental trees and shrubs native to other continents have leaves that insects native to North America cannot eat. This problem has a rippling effect. Most terrestrial birds rely on insects like caterpillars for food, especially when feeding their young. Places lacking host plants for native insects will be inhospitable to many native birds.

There are lots of reasons to celebrate and support native flora, but as colleagues at New England Botanic Garden like to say, this doesn't mean you have to uproot all your garden's daylilies. The key is choosing ecologically beneficial plants and avoiding or removing introduced species that outcompete the native plants wildlife relies on.

## **Design and plant in vertical layers**

Natural habitats feature layers of vegetation. Consider how a forest transitions from canopy at the top to understory, shrub level, and forest floor at the bottom. As you develop your garden space, consider incorporating trees, shrubs, and vines, as well as grasses and fruit and nut-bearing plants. Evergreens, like conifers, are especially valuable places of shelter for many bird species and their cones provide seeds, an important food source. And don't forget, adding plants that bloom at different times from early spring through fall is one of the best ways to support pollinators.

## **Leave undisturbed space**

More than 350 bee species live in New England where they forage for nectar and pollen. Many overwinter in logs, leaf litter, and the hollow stems of plants. Different species of butterfly, moth, and beetle, including fireflies, also rely on leaf litter and logs for shelter throughout the stages of their life cycles. So, ease up on your spring and fall clean up. Consider leaving thickets, brush piles, and dead wood along the outer edges of your yard. This natural debris doesn't have to be a mess either. You can get creative while building vital habitat by arranging downed branches in ways that are aesthetically pleasing to you. At New England Botanic Garden, for example, one of the naturalistic spaces demonstrates this idea with a beautifully crafted spiral of fallen branches that staff and visitors add year after year.

For more ideas and resources about how to use plants to create a biodiverse, ecologically beneficial garden habitat at your home check out the Xerces Society, Landscape for Life, and the Homegrown National Park movement, or visit us at New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill.

*Gardening Central Mass. is written by the team at New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill. Located on 200 acres in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at [www.nebg.org](http://www.nebg.org). The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.*