



LET'S GROW Native

Column and photograph by
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Take a moment to look out your window: do you have “good” habitat for a variety of wildlife species? In most yards, office parks, or neighborhoods, we’d probably see some large trees spreading their branches over buildings, or lining the driveways or the street. Perhaps there are a few groupings of shrubs near walkways or along fence lines, or an occasional flower bed scattered here and there. As for the rest of the areas, they’re likely to be covered in a homogeneous carpet of lawn. Sound familiar?

At first glance, this might appear to be a “good” habitat, because we can see just enough vegetation for a bird to roost, or a squirrel to find a small seed, or a chipmunk to hide momentarily from a house cat. However, if we look more closely, we’d probably be hard-pressed to find thick, soft patches of decomposing leaves on the ground for salamanders to snuggle under for moisture, or large shallow depressions of standing water where frogs and aquatic insects can shelter from predators. Nor are conventional neighborhoods typically home to wide expanses of tall flowering plants or unclipped natural grasses, where bumblebees can find abundant nectar and pollen sources, and other insects can easily feed and lay their eggs.

What’s missing in so many of our constructed landscapes is the complexity that natural systems afford. In a natural



Layered landscapes improve wildlife diversity.

system, we’d find a diverse plant community growing in multiple layers. For example, in a natural forest habitat, we’d expect to see a layer of leafy mulch and groundcover plants spread beneath different sized shrubs and small trees, shielded by an overhead canopy of towering oaks or pines.

Habitats that contain this layered, complex plant structure and species diversity provide the greatest value for wildlife, because wildlife communities are adapted for—and interdependent on—the natural plant communities they

co-evolved with. Especially important are the native plant species that insects, mammals, birds, and other wildlife rely on for survival. For example, 98 percent of songbirds feed their young insects, and over 90 percent of plant-eating insects require three or fewer *native* plant families to meet their needs. The food web that supports all life is intricately linked to the natural plant community.

Native plants are those which occur within specific habitats in a particular geographic range, where they have adapted over evolutionary time to the unique physical and environmental conditions of the area, such as the geology and soil, sunlight and rainfall, and have co-evolved with the other plant and animal species found there.

Unfortunately, most of the ornamental plants we’ve put in our yards and neighborhoods are non-native species that came from other continents. Non-native plants that we’ve brought over from Asia or Europe are not recognized as a food source by North American insects that co-evolved with North American plants, and the non-natives may not provide the same nutritional value for other wildlife species.

We rely on the natural food web to survive, too. In this column we’ll share the beauty and ease of using native plants and provide practical habitat tips for sustaining many wildlife species. Let’s take another look out that window and find creative ways to share our landscape with nature.

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RESOURCES

- ◆ *Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants* by Doug Tallamy (c. 2009, Timber Press), or visit his website at <http://www.bringingnature-home.net/>
- ◆ The DGIF Habitat Partners© Program (www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/habitat)
- ◆ Virginia Native Plant Marketing Partnership (www.PlantVirginiaNatives.org)