

Living in Harmony With Your Yard - “More Life with Less Lawn”

Traditional green turfgrass lawns and current landscape practices necessary to maintain them seem to satisfy and please many of us, but often have harmful effects on the environment in which we live. Instead of providing ecological services and supporting life, these vast turfgrass areas actually contribute to poor water quality in our surface and ground waters, poor air quality in our atmosphere, loss of wildlife habitat, and also promote flooding. According to the U.S. EPA (United States Environmental Protection Agency) a typical lawn has less than 10% of the water absorption capacity of a natural woodland area, and this is one reason for suburban flooding.

The clearing of native woodlands and other natural habitats for urban and suburban growth and the subsequent planting of grounds with extensive lawn areas including manicured arrangements of exotic ornamental plant species, puts a heavy burden on environmental and human health. This type of landscape requires extensive use of mechanical equipment, excess consumption of our limited natural resources such as water and fossil fuels, frequent application of fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides, and also generates huge amounts of solid waste.

Because of these practices:

- 💧 Our surface and ground waters are being polluted.
- 💧 Destructive flooding is more commonplace.
- 💧 Our neighborhoods’ peace and quiet and air quality are affected by noisy, polluting landscape equipment. (Gasoline-powered landscape equipment accounts for over 5% of our urban air pollution.)
- 💧 Our landfills are being overwhelmed by yard waste. (Yard wastes {mostly grass clippings} comprise 20% of municipal solid waste collected and most still ends up in landfills.)
- 💧 Biodiversity (variety in our plant and animal communities needed to sustain the species) of our ecosystems is harmfully influenced by the introduction of invasive species of landscape plants.
- 💧 Residential application of pesticides is typically at a rate 20 times that of agricultural use per acre and results in many unintended harmful results such as biomagnification of toxins as we move up both the terrestrial and aquatic food chains. (For instance, the amount of lead or arsenic in a tiny aquatic organism is minimal but the small fish eats many of these, and the bigger fish eats many of the small fish, and so on, until the Osprey, Heron, Bear, or human catches and eats the biggest fish and gets a bigger dose of lead or arsenic.)

By now, you are probably asking what on earth you can do to help solve these problems and “Clean Up Our Act.” One thing that you can do to make a positive impact is to reduce the size of the turfgrass area of your lawn and replace it with native plantings. Traditional turfgrass has extremely short roots in relation to the total plant, and these short roots neither hold the soil in place to prevent erosion, nor do they absorb any significant quantity of water. The non-native grasses also provide no ecological services for pollinators and other wildlife species. On the other hand, native plants have extremely long roots which do hold the soil in place, thus preventing erosion, as well as absorbing huge amounts of water.

Here are some benefits of Native Landscaping:

- 💧 Reduces time, energy, and money spent on yard maintenance.
- 💧 Raises property values.
- 💧 Promotes biodiversity.
- 💧 Increases value to wildlife.
- 💧 Prevents or reduces erosion.
- 💧 Reduces the need for herbicide, pesticide, and fertilizer applications.
- 💧 An additional and very significant value of native plants is that they provide ecological benefits and services such as food, shelter, nesting sites, travelling corridors, protection from predators, and habitat in general, to many species of native creatures who have co-existed with them for thousands of years.

Throughout the world, habitat loss is the leading cause of species endangerment and extinction. In the Midwest, a large portion of the land has been cleared due to agricultural and urbanization pressures, leaving marginal and fragmented habitats. Consequently, backyards play an increasingly important role in wildlife conservation.

One way that you can partially compensate for land lost to urban/suburban sprawl and the resulting impervious surfaces, is to shrink your lawn and create a Wildlife Habitat using native plants. This is especially important along streams where the vegetation can filter runoff, aid in flood control, improve water quality, and provide wildlife corridors, and also crucial to migrating birds and butterflies.

For your Wildlife Gardening to be neighbor-friendly:

- 💧 Before you start your wildlife habitat project, explain to your neighbors what natural landscaping is and the aesthetic and ecological benefits it will bring to your neighborhood.
- 💧 Try completing one section of your yard at a time. Starting small gives neighbors time to become accustomed to your yard’s new look.

- ◆ Add human touches to your garden. Bird baths, benches, and water features add interest and enjoyment that draw people into the natural landscape.
- ◆ Framing your garden with borders, paths, hedges, plant islands and fencing will provide a neat appearance that your neighbors will appreciate.
- ◆ If you live in a development where there is a homeowners' association, you should check to see if there are rules on plant species or height. You should always check for local zoning ordinances governing plant height and "weeds."
You can always work to change outdated laws that are not environmentally friendly or in-tune with designing native-plant landscapes.

If you want to shrink your lawn and create a **Bird-Friendly Habitat**, here are some steps to follow:

- ◆ Provide water year-round. A simple birdbath is a great start. Change water every 2-3 days in summer and use a heater in the winter. Place the water container about 10 feet from dense shrubs or other cover that predators may use.
- ◆ Install native plants. Select a variety of native plants to offer year-round food in the form of pollen, seeds, berries, nuts, and nectar. Try to recreate the plant ecosystem native to your area. Evergreen trees and shrubs provide excellent cover through all seasons. For an Ohio State University Extension fact sheet and list of native plants for birds, bees, butterflies, and other wildlife, go to <http://ohioline.osu.edu/findafactsheet>.
- ◆ Eliminate insecticides in your yard. Insects are the primary source of food for many bird, mammal, reptile, amphibian, and fish species and are an important source of protein and fats for growing juvenile birds.
- ◆ Keep dead trees, (snags) because they provide cavity-dwelling places for birds to raise young and a source collecting insects for food. Many species will also seek shelter from bad weather inside these hollowed out trees. (Of course if you have a dead tree that is threatening to fall on your or your neighbor's house or the power lines, you will have to remove that tree for safety's sake.)
- ◆ Put out nesting boxes. Make sure the boxes have ventilation holes at the top and drainage holes at the bottom. Boxes made of untreated wood are best.
- ◆ Build a small brush pile in a corner of your yard. Start with larger logs and top with smaller branches. Some birds will hunt, roost, or nest in brush piles.
- ◆ Offer food in feeders. Bird feeders are great sources of supplemental food during times of food scarcity, and also enhance bird viewing opportunities.
- ◆ Remove exotic and invasive plants from the yard because they can threaten other plant and animal species.

You can also create **butterfly habitat** to attract butterflies along with birds. Here is what you should do to bring butterflies home:

- 💧 Install native flowering plants. Because many butterflies and native flowering plants have grown together over time and depend on each other for survival and reproduction, it is particularly important to install native flowering plants local to your geographic area. Native plants provide butterflies with the nectar or foliage they need as caterpillars and adults. Adult butterflies may accidentally mistake a non-native, invasive plant for a good egg-laying site, which could prevent the survival of its offspring. Grow your nectar-producing native plants in sunny areas that are protected from strong winds. The *Pollinator Partnership* and *Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center* host native plant websites. Go to www.wildflower.org/collections or <http://www.pollinator.org/> for regional guides and native plant choices.
- 💧 Plant type and color is important. Adult butterflies are attracted to red, yellow, orange, pink, and purple blossoms that are flat-topped or clustered, and have short flower tubes.
- 💧 Plant for continuous bloom. Butterflies need nectar throughout the adult phase of their life span. Try to plant so that when one plant stops blooming, another begins.
- 💧 Avoid herbicides and pesticides. These types of lawn care and plant maintenance products contain chemicals that will kill butterflies and other beneficial insects in both their adult and larval phases.
- 💧 Provide a place to rest. Butterflies need sun for orientation and to warm their wings for flight. Place flat stones in your garden to provide space for butterflies to rest and bask in the sun.
- 💧 Give them a place for “puddling.” Butterflies often congregate on wet sand and mud to partake in “puddling,” drinking water and extracting minerals from damp puddles. Place coarse sand in a shallow pan and then insert the pan in the soil of your habitat. Make sure to keep the sand moist.

When you shrink your lawn and create new habitat for pollinators and other wildlife, you add color, beauty, curb appeal, property value and new life to your yard, as well as improving your air and water quality. Even planting one tree can provide habitat and food for as many as 300 species of wildlife and also absorb hundreds of gallons of stormwater and tons of carbon dioxide annually.



For more information, contact us at 330-926-2452, or visit our website at <https://sswcd.summitoh.net>