

# Eco-Friendly Yard and Garden Landscaping

For your family,  
our community health,  
and the planet



**Insects, and the birds and other wildlife that depend on them, are suffering steep population declines. Conventional home landscaping practices contribute to the problem.**

**We garden stewards need to help life flourish. Eco-friendly gardens may look different from the suburban standard, but they will be buzzing with life — attracting butterflies, bees, fireflies and birds — that enrich our daily lives.**

*Here's how to go about attracting life to your garden.*

1

## Choose native plants

Native plants provide essential food and habitat for insects that are at the foundation of a food chain on which songbirds, other wildlife, and even humans rely. Almost all insects depend on a native host plant to grow and develop into adults. Just as monarch caterpillars need milkweed, the violet fritillary needs violets, and the spicebush swallowtail needs spicebush. Without native plants insect populations decline along with birds and other wildlife higher up the food chain.

**Favor straight natives, not cultivars,** whose modified characteristics may not serve the coevolved insect. For example, the cultivars' breeding may alter its chemistry making its leaves toxic, may change its leafing out time to no longer coincide with insect larva development, may compromise the bloom shape so that it no longer fits its pollinator, or may make its blooms sterile.

**Include host and nectar plants** that provide reproduction support and year-round forage, including nectar, pollen, berries and nuts.

2

## Remove (and don't plant) invasive exotic plants

Invasive non-natives crowd out and overrun native habitat. In our region, the European common buckthorn has taken over natural landscapes, providing poorly digestible berries for wildlife. Other common invasives are garlic mustard, creeping charlie, Japanese barberry and oriental bittersweet. **Plant densely** to reduce weeds and attract more beneficial insects. **To remove invasives, hand-pull or smother them** with cardboard and mulch using the 'lasagna' gardening method.

3

## Avoid chemicals that kill

**Avoid the expense of lawn chemicals.** They aren't good for our kids and pets, who have smaller bodies and more lawn contact than we do. Lawn chemicals kill unintended targets: herbicides kill soil organisms, fertilizer runoff causes suffocating algal blooms in waterways, and mosquito sprays kill moths and bird nestlings.

We aren't enhancing biodiversity if we kill the critters we are trying to preserve.

**Avoid seeds or plants treated with neonicotinoids, or "neonics,"** the most widely used insecticides in the U.S. According to the American Bird Conservancy, neonics don't just kill insects "...a single seed treated with neonics is enough to kill a songbird."

Very commonly seeds and plants (non-natives and cultivars) sold in nurseries have been treated with neonics. Because neonics are systemic poisons, the toxin continues to spread throughout the plant over the long term, contaminating seeds, nectar, leaves, pollen, roots and even surrounding soil and water.

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### Shrink your lawn

At enormous effort and ecological cost, non-native turfgrass has become our largest irrigated U.S. crop, bigger than corn, wheat and fruit trees combined.

To nurture it, we douse it with toxic chemicals made from fossil-fuels (at up to ten times the rates typically used on farm crops), trim and sweep it with gas-guzzling, air-polluting mowers and blowers, and overwater using 30-60% of our municipal fresh water supplies. Mowing stops it from producing seeds or blooms, diminishing the limited food it could provide to wildlife.

**Replace turfgrass with native ground covers, wildflowers or shrubs** that feed wildlife and don't need expensive weekly care.

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### Make hardscapes permeable and use rooftops to advantage

Let rainwater filter and absorb into your plantings by using gravel, permeable pavers, or spaces between pavers. This reduces runoff that contributes to basement flooding and water pollution, and captures water that can benefit your plants.

**Direct home and garage rooftop rainwater** to where soil is driest or where

plants most need it, or capture downspout water in barrels or underground tanks for use in your garden.

**Create a “dry creek”** lined with pebbles and direct water to it, or create a rain garden that includes flood and drought tolerant plants to absorb and filter storm water.

**Collect solar energy on unshaded rooftops. Or plant trees** that add shade, cut your air cooling bills, shelter your home from winds, and capture carbon and stormwater.

6

### Provide water sources for birds, and butterflies

Birds, butterflies and other wildlife need water, especially in dry summers. **Birds can bathe and drink from a simple plant dish less than 3 inches deep, or butterflies can use a puddling station.** Situate these near shrubs or small trees for quick cover from hawks or cats. Freshen birdbaths weekly to remove droppings and disrupt mosquito larvae, or daily in hot weather or when in heavy use. Keep it usable in winter with an electric heating coil that melts ice. If you have a pond, add native minnows, like fatheads, to eat mosquito larvae.

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### Reduce or shade nighttime light

It **leads to deaths** of migratory birds by confusing them, drawing them toward hazards and causing them to expend precious energy needed for migration. Resident birds also are affected: it can increase their breeding failure. As for insects, they are attracted to outdoor lighting, where predators easily prey on them at such unnaturally high levels it can impact

their populations. To help: focus outdoor lights down with shades, use red or amber rather than white light, turn off non-essential lights, and — when light is needed — use light triggered by motion detectors.

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### Avoid deadly bird/window collisions

Up to one billion birds per year die from crashing into glass windows. Glass is invisible to birds and invites collisions when it reflects trees, vegetation, bird feeders or sky, shows a clear path through a building, or shows plants inside. Glass in terraces, balconies, corners and walkways also kill. **Solutions are simple and inexpensive:** stripes marked on window glass with ceramic pens, tempera paint, window films, hanging cords, external screens and shutters are effective, provided no gaps are larger than 4” x 2” for birds to try to fly through.

Questions? Email  
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**Take the Pollinator Pledge:** Sign a different kind of ‘petition’ that lets the community know eco-friendly yard management matters. Spread the word with an optional yard sign. To order go to [naturalhabitatevanston.org/takethepledge](http://naturalhabitatevanston.org/takethepledge)

*Natural Habitat Evanston aims to create a community culture that values, restores and conserves the natural habitat on which we and wildlife depend.*