Wildlife Garden – How to Make Messy Look Good

by Patricia Sutton
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WHAT WILL THE NEIGHBORS THINK?

1. Show that your gardening efforts are **intentional** and **not neglect**

2. Consider **visual cues** that convey that your yard is actively managed
   a. Add an orderly frame around your wildlife garden through hardscaping or lawn
      i. Mow edges (pathways) around garden, meadow, habitat, especially if along a sidewalk or street
      ii. Attractive fencing around edge of garden, meadow, habitat
      iii. Arbor leading into a garden, meadow, habitat

   b. Consider **SIGNAGE for your wildlife habitat** (the more signs the merrier), so neighbors (and your municipality) understand why you have an explosion of wildflowers instead of lawn:
      i. **Monarch Waystation**: https://monarchwatch.org/waystations/
      ii. NABA (North American Butterfly Association) **Certified Butterfly Garden**, and **Certified Monarch Garden**: https://naba.org/butterfly-gardens/certification-program/
      iii. **Wild Ones Certified Native Habitat** Program: https://wildones.org/cnhp/
      iv. **Certified Wildlife Habitat**: https://www.nwf.org/Native-Plant-Habitats/Create-and-Certify
      v. **Pollinator Habitat** (download a number of signs): https://www.pollinator.org/garden-signs
      vi. Monarch Joint Venture's beautiful signs: "**Native Pollinator Habitat**," "**Garden for Pollinators**," "**Monarchs Need our Help**," "**Plant Milkweed**," "**Why Native Plants?**" at: https://store.monarchjointventure.org/products/habitat-signs
      vii. Enter your habitat on **Homegrown National Park**: https://homegrownnationalpark.org/ and "**Get on the Map**": https://homegrownnationalpark.org/map/
      viii. Xerces Society "**Pollinator Habitat**" sign, "**Leave the Leaves**" sign, and "**Pesticide Free**" sign: https://gifts.xerces.org/collections/donations and https://xerces.org/pollinator-conservation/pollinator-protection-pledge
      ix. **Pesticide Free Zone** yard signs at: https://shop.beyondpesticides.org/collections/lawn-and-landscape-signs
      x. **Do Not Spray (or Mow)** signs, **Prairie in Progress, Pardon the Mess** sign: https://www.etsy.com/market/no_spray_sign https://www.prairiemoon.com/do-not-spray-or-mow-sign https://www.prairiemoon.com/prairie-in-progress-sign
      xi. CU Maurice River's "**Designated Wildlife Friendly**" sign (Cumberland County, NJ): https://www.cumauriceriver.org/conservation-wildlife/stewardship-program/
      xii. Amazon sells lots of signs too; one that caught my eye was "**Pardon Our Weeds, We're Feeding the Bees**"

   c. Seating: benches, arbor with benches
   d. Bird nest boxes
   e. Water features: bird bath(s), wildlife pond, fountain, waterfall

3. Incorporate **massed groupings (3 or more of each)** of native plants selected for their benefits to wildlife and to cover all of spring, all of summer, all of fall and until the first frost. Provide this constantly unfolding offering of nectar and fruits or seeds by planting many different perennials, shrubs, vines, and trees that flower (and fruit) at different seasons. These massed plantings will serve as an "open for business" sign for wildlife and add an inviting look to your habitat to you and to your neighbors.

WHAT WILL THE NEIGHBORS THINK? (continued)

4. Despite all this, sometimes a neighbor is not a nice person and intent on stirring things up, calls the zoning officer and reports you for bucking the norm and not having a lawn like everyone else.
   a. **Wild Ones** has a number of resources on their website to help individuals and communities (HOAs) cope with dated weed ordinances, including a "Sample Native Planting Ordinance." Rosanne Plante, an attorney experienced with writing ordinances in her professional career and an active member with Wild Ones, wrote this sample ordinance, as well as three in depth articles, and several in depth webinars available as YouTube videos on the topic, all of which are available on Wild Ones resource page: https://wildones.org/resources/
   b. Consider helping your community create a model municipal ordinance encouraging the use of native plants and healthy, wildlife-friendly landscaping. This great study, "Weeding Out Bad Vegetation Control Ordinances," can be found at the following link: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2530669
   c. I personally know people who have won this war by keeping a journal or drawing a plan of all the native plants they've planted and detailing which wildlife benefit from each – this documentation showcases your intentional wildlife habitat (rather than lawn) and that your habitat is not at all a result of neglect.

5. Invite neighbors into your garden to show the wildlife your plantings and habitat have attracted. This should be easy to do. Show them a (1) Ruby-throated Hummingbird on its favorite perch or nectaring on your Beebalm or Cardinal Flower or Coral Honeysuckle, (2) a Black Swallowtail caterpillar on your fennel, dill, parsley, or Golden Alexander, (3) a Monarch laying eggs or a Monarch caterpillar on your milkweed, (4) butterflies and bumble bees nectaring on your many native plants, (5) a Snowberry Clearwing caterpillar on your Coral Honeysuckle, etc. Turn sceptics into wildlife gardeners by sharing division of your Beebalm, New England Aster, or other robust and spreading natives.

PLANT ISSUES

1. **Mystery Plants**: seedlings of "gem" natives, weeds, or worst of all, invasives

   a. *Weeds of the Northeast*, by Uva, Neal, & Ditomaso; Rutgers Univ. Press, 1997 (iIllustrates plants in all stages of their life cycle from seed through first leaves, blooming, and into their winter appearance) and *Newcomb's Wildflower Guide*, by Newcomb, 1977.
   b. Or ID with photos of mystery plants and enter each one on iNaturalist or Seek or one of the other Citizen Science websites: https://www.inaturalist.org/
   c. My favorite plant markers are the "Tall Display Markers" (20 inches high) sold by Paw Paw Everlast Label Company; http://www.everlastlabel.com/ I like these tall plant markers because they're easy to see even when plants grow tall, plus they are easy to move as plants spread. They also sell a writing tool (special black carbon pencil), but it fades over time. Because of the fading issue, since 2018, I have created labels for my "Tall Display Markers" with a Brother P-Touch Label Maker, using their 1" tape (which can easily fit 3 easy-to-read lines of text). My lines of text include: (1) Common Name, (2) Latin Name, (3) year I got the plant and where or who I got it from, showcasing my "Garden of Friends." I created an excel database of my wildlife garden plants and can print from this database with the Brother label maker I acquired.
   d. Photo Journal / Photo Library
   e. Once ID'd, use rainy periods to easily pull out unwanted problem plants.

PLANT ISSUES (continued)

2. Too Tall

a. My once favorite plant supports, "Y-Stakes," are now made in China and so poorly made their support arms break off, so they are worthless. Folks at Walt Nicke's Garden Talk instead recommended (& I now use) **Peacock plant supports**: https://www.gardentalk.com/peacock-plant-supports-s/1913.htm
For super tall plants I circle them with **40" tall Garden Links or Linking Stakes** from Kinsman Company: https://www.kinsmangarden.com/linking-stakes/

b. For an entire bed of tall plants I've used **Rebar**, purchased at a local hardware, Home Depot, or Lowe's. Get long enough rods so that you can pound a foot or so into the ground. Place them every 3-4 feet around the bed and string twine from rod to rod to rod to contain tall plants and give them support. Put a colorful bottle over the top of the rebar so you don't poke out an eye bending down to pull out a weed.

c. Some friends have used, with great success, **discarded political sign wires** to support their plants. Others use **fallen branches** strategically placed as very successful plant supports.

d. *The Well-Tended Perennial Garden: Planting and Pruning Techniques*, by Tracy DiSabata-Aust. covers techniques to get the most out of your perennial flowers, like extending the blooming season. **Beware though, the author is not a wildlife gardener**, so some of her recommended techniques may lead you to "do in" the very wildlife you are keen to attract.

e. Haircuts for certain plants
   i. New England Aster – Two haircuts (Memorial Day and 4th of July) will result in branching, produce bushy growth and more flowers by fall when this fall bloomer blooms. Other tall-growing, fall bloomers that respond well to haircuts: native goldenrods and sunflowers.
   ii. For some summer-blooming plants that grow too tall for your garden, one haircut around Memorial Day forces them to branch, become bushier, and bloom lower. I've done this with Culver's Root, Ironweed, Joe-pye-weed, Sneezeweed, Blue Vervain, and various Bonesets/Thoroughworts.

f. Embrace vigor and abundance of tall natives and all their nectar and caterpillar potential. Plant them along a fence or at the back of your garden where they can grow as tall as they'd like.

3. Know that you can **heavily prune volunteer trees** (planted by birds that have feasted on fruits of nearby sizable trees) every spring to fit your space, so butterflies and moths can benefit from tender, new leaves (as host plant material) and so that you can study life cycles at eye level (Hackberry trees in my yard). **Know that you can heavily prune a native shrub that has outgrown its space**. Be sure to do so after it has flowered, so pollinators benefit. My Common Ninebark needs a heavy pruning every 4-5 years.

4. **Budget time to maintain your garden**. In the blink of an eye your garden can be lost to aggressive natives, unwanted weeds, young trees planted by squirrels burying nuts, and invasives. See this time as fun, not a chore, and a time when you'll learn about the natives you've planted and a time when you're likely to witness nature unfolding in your wildlife habitat (discover egg-laying butterflies, their caterpillars and chrysalises, maybe even a hummingbird nest). You're unlikely to find any of these things if you don't know your garden intimately.

PLANT ISSUES (continued)

5. **Enthusiastic Natives**
   a. Avoid "Bad Boy" natives: Obedient Plant, Black-eyed Susan, Cup Plant, Mt. Mint, Late-flowering Thoroughwort, Common Milkweed, Partridge Pea, Garden Phlox, Mistflower, Dutchman's Pipe, Trumpet Creeper, Pokeweed . . . **or, better yet, learn how to incorporate them into your plan and keep them from overpowering your garden**.
   b. Embrace vigor and abundance and all their nectar and caterpillar potential
   c. Never forget: natives SLEEP the 1st year, CREEP the 2nd year, and LEAP the 3rd year

6. **Avoid Weed Explosion**
   a. Use natural mulches that will break down into soil and enrich your garden naturally: Salt Hay, grass clippings, pine needles, pine straw, straw, oak leaves. Lay your mulch down once you can see where your different native perennials are coming up. They will suppress weeds; if they don't, lay another sheet of mulch down in trouble spots.
   b. Plant thickly enough so there is no room for weeds . . . i.e. mulch with plants
   c. In my woods, where I'd planted shade-loving perennials, a riot of weeds greeted me each spring until I began adding a fairly deep layer of oak leaves to planted areas. Now these areas are weed free and perennials easily bust through this leaf layer!
   d. You can't let your guard down: weeds and invasives will overwhelm your garden

7. **Keep Your Plants Happy**
   a. Divide perennials in spring (or fall): New England Aster is a good example. If not divided, the roots get so dense that your plant is not at its best
   b. Natural mulches mentioned above are essential to keep the ground from baking hard; they will keep soil moist and deter weeds (and make it easy to remove weeds when they do persist). With climate change (excessive heat and minimal rain), natural mulches are essential.

TIME FACTOR ISSUES

10% Rule: (1) Don't take on more than you can maintain, (2) A 10% change from lawn to wildlife habitat will greatly benefit wildlife, (3) Tackle another 10% the following year

HELPFUL RESOURCES

(beyond those mentioned earlier in these materials and Pat's other handouts)

1. *All of Doug Tallamy's books*
2. *All of Heather Holm's books*
3. For an annotated list of the Keystone Native Plants for your area (which should be the backbone of your plantings), go to the National Wildlife Federation Garden for Wildlife website: https://www.nwf.org/Native-Plant-Habitats/Plant-Native/Why-Native/Keystone-Plants-by-Ecoregion
4. If you have a small garden space and need to plant well-behaved native plants, download, read, and use the plants promoted in the book "*Native Plants for the Small Yard: Easy, Beautiful Home Gardens that Support Local Ecology*," by Kate Brandes. This book is available as a pdf: https://lgnc.org/pdfdocs/brandes_book.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0AUI8ioeOE7C29cj8kRlQCgEJy4iqZJ4viGGjw4CtsTNgIg_XmU_NJfm8
4. Pat Sutton's handouts, including "NJ's Native Trees, Shrubs, & Vines That are Beneficial to Birds": https://patsuttonwildlifegarden.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Pat-Suttons-Native-Tree-Shrub-Vine-LIST-NJ-as-of-3-4-24.pdf