

Farm Stewardship Tips Help Gardeners – Part 5



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BENEFICIAL WILDLIFE IN YOUR BACKYARD

By Mark Cullen – markcullen.com

Since moving to the country, I've learned a lot from Ontario farmers, who employ many stewardship practices that gardeners can use. Farmers, like gardeners, enjoy seeing birds and other beneficial wildlife on their land, and they often create or enhance wildlife habitat for that purpose.

Farmers create and enhance wildlife habitat within their woodlots, ponds, streams, wetlands, fencerows, yard, and, in some cases, even their barns. Gardeners can do much the same thing, using a smaller scale of course. The benefits go beyond simple enjoyment; often a healthy wildlife population assists in controlling pests such as insects that feed on crops. Naturally a balance is needed – when wildlife numbers get out of balance they can become major pests.

Farmers are instrumental in providing habitat for endangered species, such as the loggerhead shrike, for example. This songbird thrives within fields used for grazing cattle. Songbirds, hawks, deer, snakes, frogs, coyotes, geese, ducks, butterflies all do very well on farmland and the natural areas within farms. Farmers plant trees, create buffer strips along streams and ponds, and protect water quality in their wetlands in order to create or enhance wildlife habitat.

Biodiversity refers to the variety of plants, birds, animals and insects in the world and the habitats that support them. One of the distinct pleasures of gardening is seeing birds and other wildlife enjoying your hard work. Encouraging wildlife helps to establish a natural balance between pests and their natural predators. A well-known example is ladybugs feeding on aphids.

Many birds in your garden will also feed on insects, spiders and caterpillars. Once birds begin nesting in the yard it is important to continue to provide additional food through the winter. Install nesting boxes for birds and bats to make your garden more appealing. Bats have a huge appetite for insects, like moths and aphids, each evening and help to control the mosquito population. They are a welcome addition to any garden as they feed on slugs and snails. Hummingbirds are valuable pollinators and can be attracted by installing feeders with nectar.

Allowing some garden plants to go to seed will provide food for birds [which is why I recommend that you leave your perennials and ornamental grasses standing over the winter].

A garden must have a consistent supply of food each season to attract wildlife. Plants which provide nectar and pollen will attract beneficial insects. Yarrow, Honeysuckle, Columbine, Sedum Spectabilis, Heliotrope, all members of the Mint family, Sunflowers and Thyme are all plants which provide nectar and pollen. Birds are attracted to flowers that provide seeds. Plant Snapdragon, Cosmos, Sunflower and Forget-me-Not to attract seed seeking birds.

Promoting biodiversity is one of many components of the Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) program, a popular program that farmers use to evaluate the environmental benefits and risks of their farm operations and create action plans to enhance the benefits and reduce the risks. The EFP is a voluntary educational program supported through the Agricultural Policy Framework (APF), a federal, provincial and territorial initiative that aims to make Canada's agricultural sector a world leader in environmentally sustainable production. *More than two-thirds of Ontario's farmers have participated in the EFP program [including me!]*

For more information about plants that attract birds to your garden log on to markcullen.com.