

Landscape Maintenance is for the Living Things

Thoughtful Seasonal Garden Care for Bees, Birds, Butterflies, and Beyond

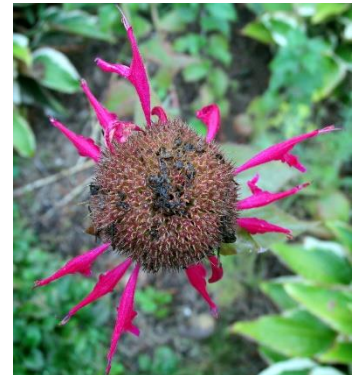
A familiar seasonal rhythm accompanies gardening, and as summer gives way to autumn, a gardener shifts into maintenance mode, tidying up spent remains and tending to triple-digit temperature survivors while delighting in a milder season that refreshes both the garden and the gardener. For a gardener who tends the landscape with a holistic and sustainable perspective, however, plants are just part of the picture, for an entire ecosystem exists right in one's own back and front yard.

With flora and fauna interconnected and interdependent, thoughtful maintenance is key to creating and protecting habitats for bees, birds, butterflies, and all other species of native wildlife. To satisfy both conventional aesthetics and beneficial wildlife welfare, consider these practices:

Avoid "ides"

Chemical pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides mostly treat "problems" in isolation with native plants and wildlife suffering collateral damage. A landscape filled with endemic plants will attract and support endemic organisms, which, in turn, develop a healthy ecosystem and functioning food chain of indigenous predators and prey, establishing a natural integrated pest management system. Allowed to grow and prosper, native plants also help crowd out weedy invasives.

Bee balm (*Monarda sp.*) offers architectural interest to the garden even after its blooms have serviced the pollinators because the dried "nutlet fruit" heads support many seed-eating birds, including Sparrows and wintering Goldfinches.



"Bee balm seed head, 11 Sept 2014" by mwms1916 is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Be a stalker

Several native species of bees in the Megachilidae family, including Leafcutters and Masons nest in tunnels—dwelling and overwintering in the hollow or pithy stalks of herbaceous plants and grasses. As the plants decline, it's beneficial to leave some stalks standing while clipping a few ends for species that don't excavate their own holes. Supporting native plant species include Bee Balm/Wild Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*) and Joe Pye Weed (*Eutrochium fistulosum*). Fittingly, the Latin *fistula* means "long, narrow pipe; tubular; hollow; porous; ulcerous", so if you see a form of that word in a plant's botanical name, chances are it's a safe bet for tunnel nesters. Birds will also appreciate noshing on seed heads, and, as a bonus, bare stalks are a preferred perch for dragonflies, voracious mosquito eaters who can consume about 300 of the blood-sucking pests per day. Wait until late spring before removing old stalks, and even then, protect any remaining bee larvae by breaking stems into small pieces and scattering them under existing shrubs in the landscape.



"Female Blue Dasher Dragonfly" by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - Midwest Region is marked with Public Domain Mark 1.0.

Dragonflies like this female Blue Dasher (*Pachydiplax longipennis*) are voracious consumers of pests such as mosquitoes and prefer to perch for their prey on spent stalks, stems, and twigs.

Branch out

Snags (dead trees) and stumps harbor a lot of life in their dead and dying states. Native cavity-nesting birds including (but not limited to) Carolina Chickadee (*Poecile carolinensis*), Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*), Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*), Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*), Eastern Screech Owl (*Megascops asio*), and Tufted Titmouse (*Baeolophus bicolor*), make their homes in safety and shelter of dead wood. Many native bees such as Carpenters (*Xylocopa*)—excellent pollinators for many flowers and vegetables—nest alone in wood tunnels. Suitable habitat may save them from choosing to live in your fence post. Even small landscapes can support a fallen limb or artfully arranged branch pile to provide habitat for dead-wood nesters and shelter for other little creatures. Of course, human safety and governing regulations prevail, so use caution and wisdom in determining what stays and what goes on residential and commercial property, especially regarding large canopy trees.

Grin and bear it

Ground-nesting bees represent 70% of Texas native bees; they seek sunny, well-drained patches of bare ground to establish entries to their underground homes, so it's important to leave some small areas of our landscape unmulched and unplanted for their use. Solitary and placid, ground-nesting bees include Mining bees (*Andrenidae* family), which are first responders of spring, making them important pollinators for early blooming fruit trees and other flowering trees and shrubs. Native American Bumblebees (*Bombus pensylvanicus*) are opportunistic below-ground nesters, often utilizing abandoned rodent burrows, wood pile bottoms, or clumps of herbaceous vegetation for their small colonies. These large, non-aggressive bees are premier pollinators of edible crops such as tomatoes, potatoes, and blueberries. They particularly love to nectar on Texas native Mealy Blue Sage (*Salvia farinacea*), so consider adding that to your landscape, if you don't already have it.



"Red-banded Hairstreak" by Dendroica cerulea is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

The Red-banded Hairstreak (*Calycopis cecrops*), seen nectaring on Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), lays its eggs on the fallen leaves of trees including Sumac, Wax Myrtle, and several Oak species.

Leaves provide shelter for numerous small species, including bumblebees, lizards, toads, and overwintering butterfly pupae. Banded Hairstreaks (*Satyrrium calanus*) and Red-Banded Hairstreaks (*Calycopis cecrops*), for example, lay their eggs on fallen leaves under Sumacs (*Rhus* spp.), Wax Myrtles (*Morella cerifera*), and several Oaks (*Quercus* spp.); removing the leaves from the ground underneath them destroys the pupating life. Additionally, leaf litter protects plant roots and adds structure and nutrients to the soil as it decomposes, nurturing new plant growth and feeding organisms that thrive in its decay, including invertebrates—vital to the food web. Almost all terrestrial North American birds feed insects to their young, even if the adults themselves are mostly berry and seed eaters. A Carolina Chickadee, for example, weighs less than ½ ounce but requires up to 9000 caterpillars to raise one brood. And, in the

“For What It’s Worth” category, oak trees support more than 500 species of lepidoptera (butterfly and moth) caterpillars—significantly more than any other native tree or plant.

Power down

Commonly used maintenance tools like lawnmowers, leaf blowers, and weed whackers may be convenient for humans, but they’re terribly detrimental to the little critters living in our landscapes. A leaf blower in a little wildlife habitat could be likened to a tornado ripping through a residential neighborhood, wreaking destruction in mere seconds. Not only can the force of those tools destroy dwelling and nesting sites, but the creatures themselves may be maimed or killed. So, don’t blow their cover. Sweeping and raking do far less damage and (bonus!) save the gardener a trip to the gym. For little creatures who have successfully evaded predation, death by weed whacker is a particularly sad end. Also, even pulling weeds by the roots may disturb native ground-nesting bees and other small creatures existing in the vegetation. Cutting weeds by hand (with pruners or scissors, depending on the scope) prevents and removes weedy seed heads while protecting the surrounding soil. Reel mowers are a more humane and earth-friendly option than gas-powered mowers, but if they aren’t practical for the size of your space, give the wildlife a chance to temporarily evacuate the area by mowing from the inside out, so they can move to the outer edges instead of being trapped in the middle of the work area. For isolated islands of turf, walk the area before mowing and let the mower run for a few minutes before beginning to cut; the sound and vibration may encourage small ones in hiding to seek temporary shelter elsewhere. This autumn, don’t fall for the conventional view that a perfectly manicured garden is the only good garden. Clean may look tidy, but it’s pretty sterile. Healthy and productive life is a little messy sometimes! So be mindful of the little creatures seeking refuge under your stewardship and welcome them to the wonderful world of your wildscaped garden.

Recommended Reading

Tallamy, D. W. (2018). *Bringing Nature Home, How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants*. Portland, Oregon: Timber Press.

Breneman, K. M. (2002). *Gardening with Nature in Texas*. Plano Texas: Republic of Texas Press.

Damude, N. and Bender, K. C. (1999). *Texas Wildscapes, Gardening for Wildlife*. Texas Parks and Wildlife Press.

Lawson, N. (2017). *The Human Gardener, Nurturing a Backyard Habitat for Wildlife*. Hudson, NY: Princeton Architectural Press.