

## Why Your Backyard Still Matters



*My Backyard Habitat* column first appeared in the Newtown Bee three years ago this month with our premier article, *Why Your Backyard Matters*. We revisit this topic with the hope that our monthly column has inspired readers to take a closer look at their yards and the role each landscape must play in supporting biodiversity, so critical for all life on earth, including us.

If we asked homeowners what expectations they have of their yards and landscapes, most would say they want them to be aesthetically pleasing, be relatively maintenance free, and if possible, provide multi-season interest. We believe our landscapes can and should accomplish these things and with some thoughtful planning, do much more.

Our landscapes and the plants we choose must also function to support pollinators, birds and other wildlife. Dan Jaffe, botanist with the New England Wild Flower Society said it best: "As our landscapes become more developed and the space between wild areas grows wider and wider, it is critical that we think of our managed landscapes, like the gardens we care for, as more than just ornamentation." Providing for native pollinators is especially important because they are essential for the reproduction of most terrestrial plants including crops we value for food.

Life on earth depends on diversity. Diversity of plants and wildlife go hand in hand. Yet we are losing insects at an alarming rate - pollinators, beneficial insects that control pests, caterpillars and other insects that provide food for birds, amphibians, reptiles and mammals. The main drivers of this "**insect apocalypse**" are loss of habitat and floral resources intensified by the massive spread of invasive species, overuse of pesticides in our landscapes, and a changing climate.

Our landscapes are critical ecosystems, not only for providing for wildlife, but also for capturing and filtering stormwater and sequestering carbon to curtail the effects of climate change. That means reducing lawns, planting natives and preserving trees and forested areas.

And, since all of us live on a watershed, it is incumbent upon us to protect it. Chemical fertilizers and pesticides find their way into our water supply. Pesticides should never be applied routinely where no problem exists or simply for aesthetic purposes.

## What Must Homeowners Do to Protect Our Environment?

**Control Invasive Plants** – For decades, invasive species have been introduced to our shores both accidentally and intentionally. Many trees and shrubs brought here as ornamentals for the nursery trade have escaped our landscapes and infiltrated our woodlands and forests, outcompeting our native plant species. Homeowners can help by removing invasives from their landscapes, roadside edges, and borders.

**Eliminate Pesticides** - Insecticides are a big problem for native bees, fireflies, other beneficial insects, and birds. Rodenticides used in bait boxes are killing owls, hawks and other raptors. Herbicides for weed control are wiping out milkweed and other native wildflowers that are critically important for supporting many wildlife species. We encourage pesticide free lawns and gardens and only using organic fertilizers.

**Reduce Lawn Areas** - Lawns do have a place in our landscapes but are dead zones for wildlife. Consider reducing lawn wherever possible. Native ground covers around trees are “soft landings” which preserve beneficial insects that need to hibernate under plants and leaves. Cleanup is best left for spring. A healthy sustainable yard that provides for wildlife will require less time and effort, as well as the costs associated with managing a fussy lawn.

**Plant More Natives** - Native plants, trees and shrubs evolved over millennia within a region’s environment, making them well adapted to a particular area. The EPA has defined ecoregions that share similar climates, geology and hydrology such as our Northeastern Coastal Zone. These local natives, once established, require less water and maintenance. Properly sited, they remain healthy, long-lasting and beautiful.

Many thanks to our readers for embarking on this journey to discover why our backyards matter. We hope to inspire many more homeowners to make their backyards... and front yards too... the very best they can be by planting more native trees, shrubs and plants, reducing lawn areas, removing invasive plants, and eliminating the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.