



# building a habitat garden

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Photo by Mieke Watkins

California is a place of exceptional biological diversity. Many of the species that live here can't be found anywhere else. These unique plants and animals have evolved together over many millennia and depend on each other, as each provides something the other needs. Trees provide shade, shelter, and food for nourishment. Animals spread the seeds of plants, help with pollination, and provide free pruning services (sometimes a little more than we would like). Each is adapted to the cycles of dry and wet weather, clay and marshy soils, seasons of dormancy and growth.

## a perfect symbiosis

Groups of plants that are adapted to local conditions establish collaborative habitats, or communities. Natives have evolved to cooperate rather than to compete with each other, making the community self-sustaining. These habitats, in turn, support vibrant insect populations that attract birds and animals that feed on the insects. Plants native to the soil and climate of our specific region provide the best food sources for wildlife.



Manzanita grows equally well in the garden and in the wild. Photo by Mieke Watkins

## urbanization

California's massive growth in recent decades has eliminated 90% of the native habitats that once covered the state from north to south. The remaining patches of native plant communi-

ties are not sufficient to support the wildlife that depends on them for shelter, food and breeding grounds. In addition, these regions are often widely separated. Many animals aren't large enough to cross the artificial barriers between resources. Coyotes can traverse the housing developments that have been built in their territory, but they'd prefer to be in wildlands, away from people. Birds and bees may exhaust themselves trying to find food for their young, or flowers with pollen. Monarch Butterflies, once ubiquitous, have declined 95% in the last two decades due to the near eradication of the lowly milkweed plant – the only food their caterpillars eat.



Monarch caterpillars only eat milkweed. Photo by Donna Grubisic

Native plants in home gardens can restore the vitality of these plant communities, and provide resources missing from green deserts of lawn grass and imported plants like jasmine, roses and hydrangeas. If we take our gardening cues from nature, some of these intricate relationships among plants, insects, birds and other animals can be revitalized.

## what is a habitat garden?

Habitat gardening is all about viewing the garden as a living ecosystem rather than merely as outdoor decoration. Habitat gardens embrace biological

diversity, ecological design, and environmentally friendly gardening methods. And, perhaps most importantly, they can help re-establish corridors between larger native plant communities to aid wildlife stressed by human encroachment.



Who knew Anna's Hummingbirds ate persimmons! Photo by Bob Watkins

For children, in particular, a habitat garden can be a big, wild world full of delights to be discovered, and a wonderful introduction to the concept of stewardship for nature. At every season, different plants, insects, and animals are helping each other thrive – or consuming each other. When manzanitas start to bloom in late December, solitary Mason Bees emerge from their brood cells to start their yearly life cycle. Manzanitas also provide a valuable source of nectar for Anna's Hummingbirds, now resident in the Bay Area all year.



Songbirds consume toyon berries in the fall. Photo by Bob Watkins





Monkey flowers are an important source of nectar for pollinators. Photo by Mieko Watkins

Monkey flowers start to bloom in March, in time to provide nutrition for the annual northward migration of Rufous Hummingbirds. Our wild lilacs, the ceanothus species, put on new leafy growth that provides a rich source of calcium just as deer start to grow new antlers. When it sets seed, sparrows and finches come to feast.

### building your own habitat garden

To find the best choices for your garden, look to the native plant communities near your home. If you live near open meadows, a mixture of native bunchgrasses like purple needlegrass and California fescue with native wildflowers are likely to do well and will attract Meadowlarks, Western Fence Lizards, Gray Foxes and Red-tailed Hawks. Oak woodlands, meanwhile, support thousands of insect species, more than 160 species of birds, over 150 mammals, amphibians and reptiles, and 2,000 varieties of plants. Companion plants in oak woodlands often include ceanothus, coffeeberry,

currants, snowberry and toyon. Under them will grow native bunchgrasses like festuca and melica, and groundcovers like yerba buena and hummingbird sage – a resource-rich community for everything from soil bacteria to Black Bears.

Any native plant added to your garden will help support important insect populations that are the foundation of the food chain. Planting groups of natives found together in the wild will prove even more successful. There's no need to start from scratch; many drought-tolerant Mediterranean species are compatible with our native plants, and provide enhanced resources for wild creatures throughout the year. However few or many native plants you can find room for in your flowerbeds and under your trees, the wildlife will thank you for it!

To get a list of native plants that will do well in your area, go to <http://calscape.cnps.org> and type in your zip code.



California poppies and cream cups among the grasses on Mt. Burdell Photo by William Follette

**WildCare** is thrilled to announce that the Marin chapter of the **California Native Plant Society** is working with our Education Team to design native habitat gardens for our new site on Smith Ranch Road.

Stay tuned for more updates soon!

## I volunteer spotlight I



Megan Hui is an English major in her fourth year at San Jose State University. A native of San Francisco, where she has lived all her life. Megan is a long time animal lover, but says “I never found a place I enjoyed working or volunteering until I found WildCare.”

She started volunteering in the Birdroom on Sunday mornings, in the Spring of 2011 when she was a junior at Lowell High School. Five years later, it is still her shift.

When asked to describe her experience at WildCare, Megan answers: “Working with the other volunteers and Victor (her Birdroom supervisor) is really a great experience. I’ve learned so much in the years that I’ve been here. Every shift includes cleaning cages, incubators and aviaries, washing dishes, giving meds, doing patient evaluations, and tube feeding baby pigeons. It is not, however, always glamorous. In the Birdroom, we all do our part to help each other out because we’re a team. We all clean, wash dishes, cut up mice and smelt, and do jobs that are not always the most desirable. The job is always rewarding though. Knowing that I did my part to help the animals is what I look forward to every Sunday.”

Megan also enjoys meeting and training new volunteers. “It’s always good to welcome new faces who are eager to learn. When I first applied to volunteer here, I had no idea I would become so attached. Volunteering at WildCare has been a great experience, and I plan on continuing for as long as I can!”