

BASICS OF HABITAT GARDENING

Fundamentally, a habitat garden is designed with a sense of place, building on the local plant community, and preserving and protecting California natives already present. Gardening like this is more than just using a sustainable, organic approach to all the tasks that come with maintaining a garden; it is stewardship of the land, and husbandry of all the natural resources. It is staying tuned into—and respecting—the natural cycles and rhythms of nature.

Ways to imbue your garden with a sense of place:

Learn about the native plant community that is closest to your home and garden and tie your garden design into this native ecosystem. The creatures that are naturally present within that plant community will be the ones that are first attracted to the enhanced foraging opportunities your garden will offer.

Identify the California native plants already present on your property; preserve and protect these plants. Add more native plants from the prevalent plant community; then increase the biodiversity in your garden by selecting microclimate areas on your property that can create appropriate conditions for plants from other plant communities, or add “well-behaved” non-native plants that can provide additional habitat resources.

Be particular about which non-native plants you include in your garden, especially if you are gardening next to wild lands. At Home Ground, we grow only regionally appropriate “well-behaved” non-natives; these are plants that do not spread outside of cultivated areas because they cannot survive without water during the dry season.

Grow plants with a diversity of forms: vertical layers of trees, shrubs, vines, groundcovers, and grasses. Snags, logs, and brush piles also provide cover and foraging sites for birds.

Grow a diversity of plants that bloom in different seasons. The more plants that are producing nectar, pollen, seeds, berries, nuts or fruits, the more birds you will attract. Let flowers and grasses go to seed; after all the seeds are eaten the remaining chaff is often used for nesting materials.

Plant for the insects first! Plant drifts of flowering plants that provide nectar and pollen throughout each season, if possible. Fill your garden with plants from the aster/sunflower family and umbellifers (carrot family). Many of the plants in these families are particularly good at attracting pollinators.

Plant larval host plants for local butterfly species. To identify butterfly species that are present in your area, plant one of the nectar-rich, long blooming species that act as a magnet for butterflies. Buddleias, verbenas, and lantana, though not native, bloom for a long period of time and are loved by butterflies. Once you know which butterfly species show up, learn to identify the larval and pupal stages of those species.

Plant California native wildflowers and strive to get natural populations established. Many annual wildflowers show up at just the right time to provide for many native insect species. Remember: California’s flora and fauna evolved together!

Make your garden a pesticide free zone. Insects are the foundation of ALL other life. Be tolerant of the prey species; they usually show up first and their populations build up before the predatory species arrive to achieve a natural balance.

Practice organic, sustainable gardening methods and techniques. Avoid the use of synthetic fertilizers.

Start with healthy soil—compost and mulch are essential ingredients. Recycle plant materials on site as mulch, compost, and brush piles.

Provide a source of clean water, as simple as a shallow saucer or birdbath. A wildlife-friendly pond must have easy escape routes, such as emergent vegetation, logs half in and out of the water, or a shallow “beach” or seep side.

Create a heat sink and basking opportunities by using stone and gravel in your garden. Uneven surfaces in rough stone often hold a little moisture accessible to insects, and walls of dry-stacked stone provide lots of hiding and overwintering places for small creatures.

Cultivate a natural, informal look. Manicured gardens are not wildlife friendly.

Allow “managed” populations of weeds, if you can. Some weedy species, such as Italian thistle, English plantain, and cudweeds, are excellent habitat plants that attract both prey and predatory species of insects, and also provide for the larval stages of some beautiful butterfly species.

CHANGE YOUR MINDSET! Learn to appreciate ALL the creatures that show up in a habitat garden full of natural resources. Have a place to sit where you can observe and enjoy the activity.

“When you see the small things, you see everything!” Naturalist BOB STEWART