

TENNESSEE BIODIVERSITY: From Barn Swallow to Zebra Swallowtail: How to Foster Backyard Habitat for Wildlife

By Margeaux Emery, garden writer and Tennessee Extension Master Gardener, Knox County

Making your backyard hospitable to wildlife starts with deciding on the types of wildlife you'd like to attract. Knowing those will guide your research on how to evaluate what your land offers and how, in turn, to enhance its ability to attract and sustain the animals you desire.

Consider the Whole Ecosystem

As you consider your backyard, Tennessee naturalist Margie Hunter says to think broadly and think native. Hunter wrote the authoritative *Gardening with the Native Plants of Tennessee: The Spirit of the Place* (University of Tennessee Press, 2002; <https://utpress.org/title/gardening-with-the-native-plants-of-tenn>). She sees encouraging yards and landscapes to return to Tennessee's natural conditions as a way to support wildlife and also to experience firsthand how all the different components of natural history—the wildlife, the native plants, the environment itself—function as a whole.



Native azaleas attract wildlife, from the butterflies whose wings collect pollen as they sip nectar, to hummingbirds and bees who frequent their showy flowers. Tennessee is home to the nation's leading native azalea supplier, East Fork Nursery in Sevierville. This vivid UT orange bloom is one of their selections. Photo by Vivian Abney, East Fork Nursery



Getting to watch baby birds, such as this mockingbird fledgling, is one of the joys that backyard feeders and good bird habitat provide each spring. Photo by Kristy Keel-Blackmon, [Oak Roots Creative](http://OakRootsCreative.com)

"It is amazing to me, since I began putting more and more native plants in my own yard, the wide variety of insects and birds and even reptiles and amphibians that I see," Hunter says. "Because I have these functioning biological systems in my yard, I don't have to worry about spraying or using toxic chemicals, so it has actually made gardening easier. You are creating or helping to recreate or foster the restoration of something that has been here long before we were, which is a satisfying and beautiful thing."

Some plant nurseries and garden centers may carry a selection of native plants. Often you can find native plants that will thrive in your

area at specialty nurseries that focus on them. Look for ones near you. If you don't find them, search for businesses or groups that support wildlife and habitat conservation to see what they may offer. At her website, <http://www.gardeningwithnativeplants.com/>, Hunter provides links to mail order companies that offer native plants and also links to native plant groups, including the [Tennessee Native Plant Society](http://TennesseeNativePlantSociety.org).

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People often assume a plant that is native requires no care and will flourish all on its own. This is incorrect. Hunter says natives can require as much care, and some even more, as exotic annuals or perennials. So don't forget to water and weed to help them thrive. Read plant tags or descriptions closely to match plants with the conditions they prefer, such as moist rich soil or poor, shade or sun. There are many excellent resources online to learn more about native plant care.

Meet Wildlife's Four Needs

Provide cover. Weedy or brushy areas on your property may seem undesirable, but wildlife prize them for everything from cover from predators to nesting sites. A yard that transitions from open areas to shrubby borders to overstory trees often supports the greatest diversity of birds while serving other wildlife, as well.

Provide food. Adding feeders is one way, but also consider the plants you grow or might add. Choose plants with wildlife benefits, such as berries or nuts, and strive to provide sources of food year-round. Wildlife-friendly plants at your home's foundation make for easy indoor watching.

Provide water. Birdbaths are valuable and there are many creative DIY options for them. Ponds are another idea. Oak Ridge resident Robert Lauf enjoys the steady crop of frogs and toads his ponds provide. He also notes how the water attracts birds, especially in winter when it is often easier for them to find food than it is to find water. "Even when the ponds are mostly frozen, there will be a melted area next to the concrete wall. Birds will land on the ice and drink from the little melted area. It's great for winter birdwatching, seeing finches and songbirds in winter colors."

Provide shelter. Add housing for birds, bats, and Mason bees. Learn the housing features viewed as ideal for particular types of birds or insects. Here Mother Nature can lend a hand. A hollowed tree or dying one offers rich habitat for insects and homes for cavity-dwelling birds.

Treat Yards and Pests with Care

In nature, each animal exists in connection to others. When you use insecticides, you reduce the numbers of insects involved in pollination, and they extend well beyond butterflies and bees. Wildlife that feed upon insects can also be affected, including birds, frogs, bats, toads, skinks, and lizards, and effects on the ecosystem can extend further up the food chain.

[Tennessee "Smart Yards"](#) operate in harmony with Tennessee's native flora, soil, and topography. Andrea Ludwig, a UT associate professor of ecological engineering, offers this advice. "Be weather aware when applying lawn chemicals or plant protectants. Know when it's going to rain and apply only in dry conditions. Give waterways a good buffer. Study label instructions closely and read all warnings." [Contact your county](#)



Planting flowers to feed pollinators and then finding a Monarch enjoying them is breathtaking. Photo by Charles Denney.



Add a pond to your property and enjoy the splash and serenades of a variety of toads and frogs, like this American bullfrog. Photo by Kristy Keel-Blackmon, [Oak Roots Creative](#)

[Extension agent](#) to learn more about how to make your yard a Smart Yard.

For More Information

These free publications from UT Extension offer a wealth of information on supporting backyard wildlife.

Managing Wildlife Around Your Home

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1868.pdf>

Improving Your Backyard Wildlife Habitat

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1633.pdf>

Urban Trees for Wildlife

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/SP530.pdf>

The Tennessee Yardstick Workbook (guides you through an evaluation of your yard and yard care practices.)

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W219.pdf>

4-H Youth Activity, "Spying on Wildlife"

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W286.pdf>



Offering nectar sources for hummingbirds is easy. Ask your garden center for recommendations for hummingbird-friendly plants, such as red salvia, and add some hummingbird feeders to your yard. The only needs are to replenish them often and keep them scrupulously clean. Photo by: Kristy Keel-Blackmon, [Oak Roots Creative](#)



Tiger Swallowtails are another of the breathtaking pollinators you can attract to your yard with the right native plants! Photo by Charles Denney.



A patio bordered by taller plants, such as Phlox or cane, offers support for yellow garden spiders, like this, and their kin. (Photo credit: Kristy Keel-Blackmon, [Oak Roots Creative](#))



Owls are attracted to good habitat for hunting, and can help keep a check on unwanted guests to the garden, such as voles. Photo by Kristy Keel-Blackmon, [Oak Roots Creative](#)