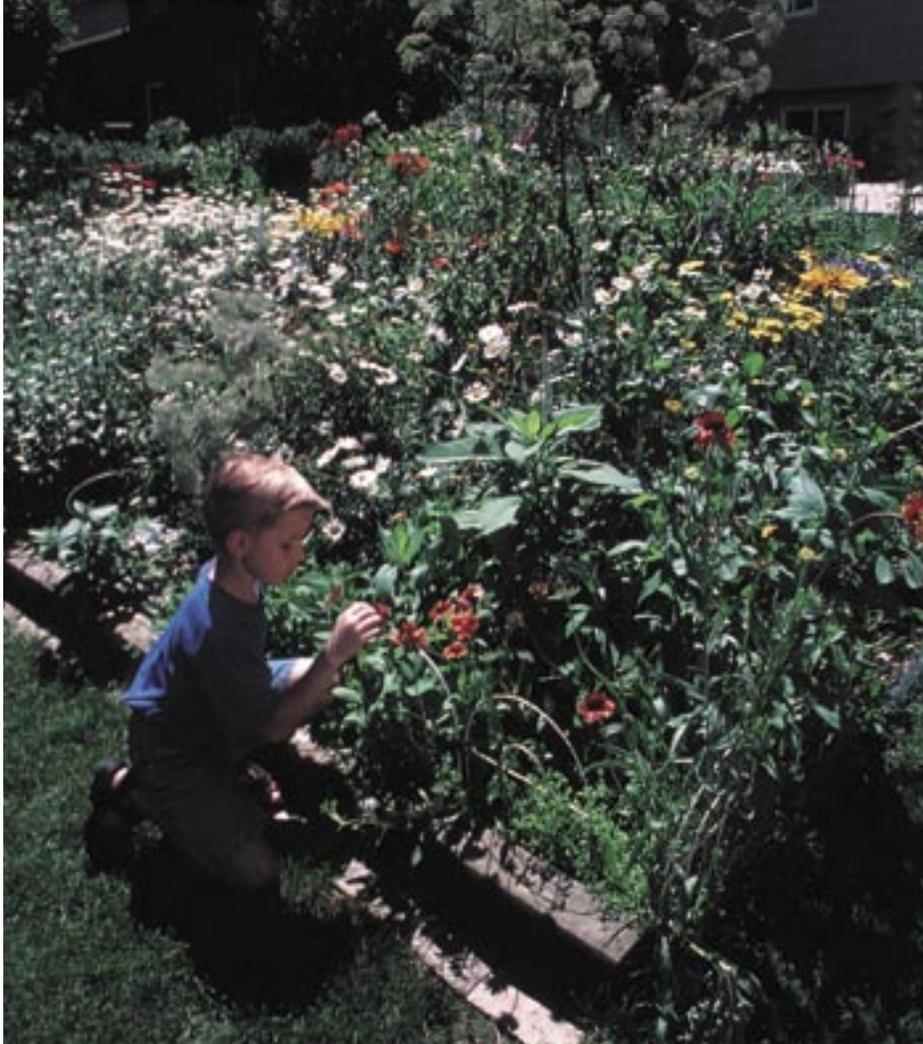


Go Wild! With Wild Yards



NRCS Photo

By *Rose Sullivan*

Are you someone who is interested in attracting wildlife to your yard? Do you have a desire to create a habitat that is rich in diversity and supports plants and animals native to West Virginia? Maybe you already have a great place for wildlife in your yard but would like to attract specific types of wildlife, like butterflies, amphibians or songbirds. If so, the West Virginia Wild Yards Program may be for you.

For Mary Ann and Alex Honcharik of Tucker County, members of the Wild Yards program since

1998, being involved with the Wild Yards program has resulted in enjoying wildlife more closely.

“One of the striking differences in our yard is the amount of birds that we now have coming through,” Mary Ann says. “We planted spruce trees that have created more winter cover and attract a whole range of birds, including woodpeckers, chickadees, finches and a variety of songbirds.” During the warmer months the Honchariks mow only pathways through the grass on a regular basis.

“We see a lot of butterflies on the property now and the small

pond we created attracts many wood frogs in early spring,” she adds. “Even our grandchildren have benefited from seeing nature up close with the diversity we have attracted.”

This program, first established in 1997, has certified over 130 Wild Yards throughout West Virginia. One doesn't have to have a large piece of land to become certified. You may have a farm, or have a house on a city lot or be an apartment dweller with lots of creativity. To become a Wild Yards participant you need to provide the basic needs of wildlife. The specific aspects of a Wild Yard that are necessary to attract and maintain wildlife include shelter, water, food and space.

Shelter can be provided in many different ways. Some examples are: providing a nest box for birds; creating an unmowed area planted with warm season grasses to provide cover for ground birds; leaving a brush pile to create habitat for small mammals, rabbits, box turtles or garter snakes; or planting evergreen trees to provide winter cover for a number of species.

Water is crucial to wildlife. You may have a great source of water already present, such as a nearby stream or pond. If you don't have a nearby source, providing a bird bath or creating a small pond – perhaps a water garden – may be a wonderful way to improve backyard habitat.

Food comes in a variety of forms. Putting up bird and wildlife feeders can be beneficial, but planting native vegetation as a source of food for animals is one of the best ways to ensure the diversity and sustainability of West Virginia wildlife. Providing birds with suet and year-round feeders increases their chance for survival. However, most species of songbirds feed insects, worms and spiders to their young, so providing habitat for these tiny invertebrate

creatures is equally important. This means limiting or eliminating the use of insecticides in your yard and leaving parts of it unmowed.

Native plants (as opposed to the exotic ornamentals that you find in most nurseries) play an integral role in the life of wildlife. Native animals, especially the bees, butterflies and other pollinators, have co-evolved with and adapted to native plants. When we plant an exotic, it may become invasive and crowd out other species of plants that are crucial parts of wildlife habitats. The spread of invasive plant species has become a significant threat to wildlife, often in ways that are not yet fully understood.

Space is a necessary requirement for all wildlife. Of course your Wild Yard will not limit the range of a species. Wild animals, birds and insects do not refer to the county tax maps to determine their movements! It is important however, for each of us to realize the importance of the fragmentation of habitats that has occurred as a result of human activities. Species have different habitat requirements, and some will not cross wide areas where their habitat has been removed. Try to keep a diversity of habitats on your property whenever space permits.

Some people are surprised to learn that NOT changing their yards often benefits wildlife. For example, leave that dead standing tree as it is. If it is hollow, it is a great place for mammal dens. It also can provide food for insect eaters, and provide singing perches for songbirds and hunting perches for raptors. Woodpeckers will excavate nest cavities, and those openings may be used by others such as flying squirrels and chickadees.



Mary Ann Honcharik

Alex Honcharik sits beside the pond he and his wife designed on their property in Tucker county

A dead tree also provides the medium for growth of a wide range of mushroom species--food for red and flying squirrels, insects, snails and humans. Many are also favorites of mushroom hunters, such as oysters, brickcaps, hen-of-the-woods and chicken-of-the-woods. Of course you need to know what you are looking at--dead wood

also supports poisonous mushrooms such as the deadly Galerina and Jack-o-Lantern. Also don't be in such a hurry to gather the leaves under your trees. Leaf litter provides a place for insects that are a food source for birds and shrews. Not mowing close to the edge of a pond increases habitat for frogs and turtles.



Alex Honcharik

Mary Ann Honcharik

For Jan Woodward Heffner of Fairmont, participating in the WRS program has had many benefits. As an advocate of a diversity-rich yard and a certified Wild Yards participant since 2002, she has appreciated the parade of wildlife that has used her yard, especially in the winter when cover and food become most important. She often sees fox and wild turkeys forage in her pesticide-free yard and has helped her garden club understand the importance of diversity by building toad houses. "It is not any more trouble to have an ecologically sound yard," she said, "and the reward is in all the animals I see."

Rose Sullivan is the WRS coordinator for the Wild Yards Program, the Outdoor Wildlife Learning Sites Program, and the West Virginia Master Naturalist Program.

How to Have a Certified West Virginia Wild Yard

It's easy! Request a booklet and application from the WRS Wildlife Diversity Program at 304-637-0245 or email: rosesullivan@wvdnr.gov. You can also go online with the following link: <http://www.wvdnr.gov/wildlife/landscape.shtm>. At that web page you can download the Wild Yards booklet and application as well as get information on native shrubs, butterfly gardening, enhancing bird habitats, and find out where to buy native plants as well as what plants to avoid. After you send back your application, and it is reviewed for certification, you will receive a sign that you can post in your yard stating that your yard has been selected as a West Virginia Wild Yard.

