

Chipmunks dart from one spot to the next, occasionally stopping for a cool drink from the goldfish pond. Caterpillars



munch copper fennel right down to the ground, without ever encountering a lethal dose of pesticide. In each of five vine-covered arbors songbirds are nesting, while somewhere nearby a raccoon sleeps away the day. And so it goes in the back and front yards of Angela Green, a Smyrna resident whose property is a certified wildlife habitat.

Three years ago Green decided to do away with her lawn. "It seemed like a waste of time, energy and money," she says. "First you fertilize it to make it grow, then as soon as it does, you whack it off. That seems so contradictory to me." As her lawn shrunk, flower gardens, shrubby areas and eventually a pond sprang up.

Because Green's property backs up to a horse pasture with woods beyond, it was an ideal refuge for all types of "critters," as she calls her wildlife visitors. She has added wood and stone piles to provide natural shelters, and every structure on the property is designed to create additional nooks and crannies. For example, all of Green's garden benches are closed



HILDA BRUCKER

Contributing Editor Hilda Brucker has been writing about garden

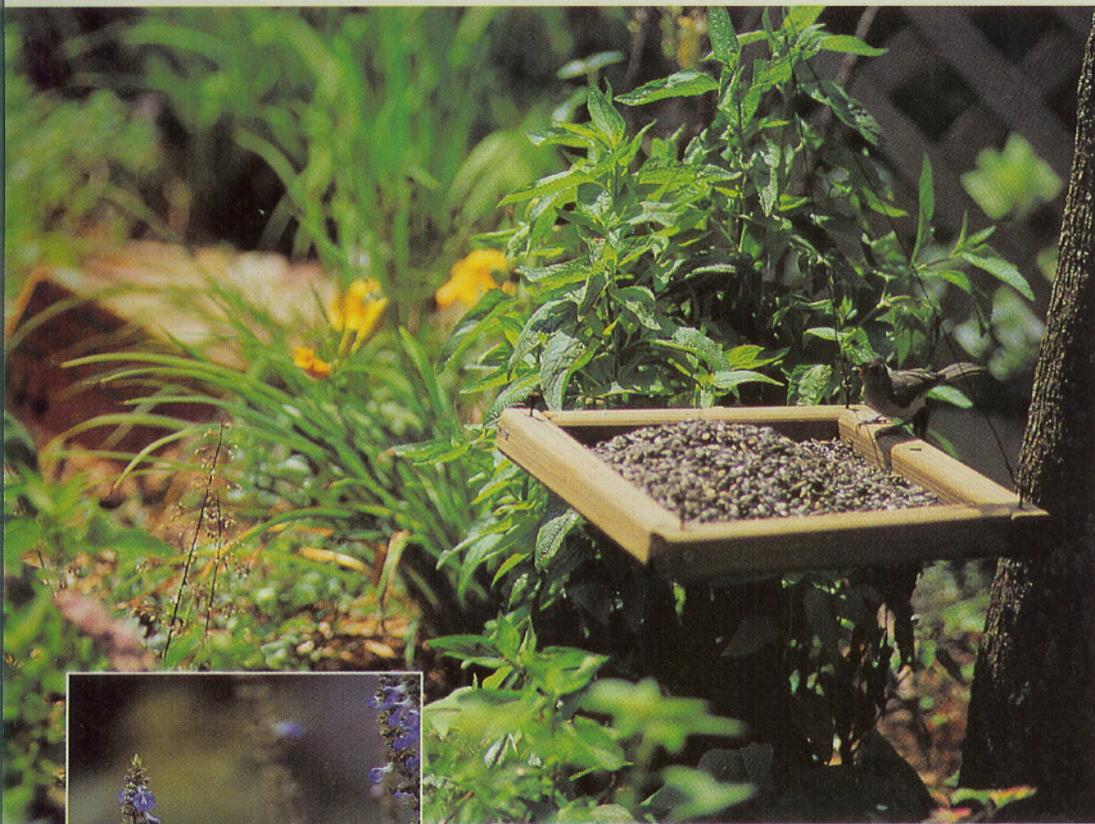
interests for two years for *Atlanta*. This month she writes about people who have certified their yards as wildlife habitats. Having grown up in downtown Cleveland, Brucker was amazed by all wildlife she found. "Woodpeckers were an incredible novelty." And while writing the story, she began to view her garden and the animals in it differently — for example, taking note of the danger pesticides pose to birds. She herself has a new friend, a chipmunk, in her garden.

Critter Comforts

TURNING YOUR BACK
YARD INTO A PRIVATE
WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

BY HILDA J. BRUCKER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBB HELFRICK



in and raised up slightly with stones so her critters can hide out underneath.

This backyard habitat, which includes a butterfly and hummingbird garden, has given Green so much enjoyment that she has just about moved into it, spending most of her time on a large, screened-in porch where she (and the neighborhood children) can observe the yard's busy activity. During the warm months she even sleeps on the porch.

Green is part of a national trend that started in 1973, when the National Wildlife Federation established a program under which homeowners and gardeners could certify their property as wildlife habitats. In the 1980s and 1990s, with environmental concerns a key issue, interest in the program has skyrocketed. According to Judy Tindel, of the Georgia Wildlife Federation, homeowners, schools, churches and even corporate facilities, such as UPS' world headquarters, are certifying their properties.

In order to certify, you must fill out a simple form stating how you have provided food, shelter, water and nesting sites for wildlife. Why go through this process? "The primary motivation is to be part of a mini-network of property owners around the country that are reversing the destruction of natural habitats," says Tindel. "You can actually have a hands-on effect on the environment in your own back yard, even if you can't do much to stop rain forest destruction."

Occasionally a homeowner will express a fear of attracting "dangerous" animals that might be harmful to people or pets. "A lot of these fears are not rooted in reality," says Tindel. "The key is education. Take snakes, for example. Once you understand their role in the environment, you have to value them. Some people have

To qualify as a certified wildlife habitat, a garden must provide food, shelter, water and nesting sites. Green supplements the natural food supply with bird and animal feeders.

PLANNING YOUR BACKYARD HABITAT

While gardening for wildlife tends to go hand in hand with reducing the amount of lawn, your back yard doesn't have to go totally wild. Maintaining a small lawn area not only visually separates the house from the wooded wildlife areas, but it also provides a sunny area for gardens that will attract butterflies and hummingbirds.

All wildlife have four basic needs to survive: food, water, shelter and a safe place to raise young. How you meet each of these needs determines which species you will attract. For example, to attract birds you may need only to provide a few nesting boxes. To attract small mammals like chipmunks, however, you might have to add a brush pile. The greater the variety of these four elements in your yard, the more diverse your wildlife visitors will be.

FOOD. Rather than relying on feeders exclusively, it's best to let Mother Nature provide a constant source of food by planting shrubs, vines and trees that produce edible nuts, seeds or berries. Holly, beauty-berry (*Callicarpa americana*) and blackberry together provide nearly four seasons of berries. Oak trees provide acorns, dogwoods and sumac provide red berries through the fall and winter and service-berry (*Amelanchier* species) produces berries in late spring or early summer.

Bird feeders are often used to supplement the winter diet of birds. For general feeding most species will eat black sunflower seeds.

Ground feeders like doves are partial to a scattering of cracked corn. Suet attracts insectivorous birds such as woodpeckers.

WATER. The key here is to maintain a clean, dependable water source through all four seasons — even in the dead of winter when you don't feel like trekking outside. Unclean water or a source that's allowed to dry up too often will not be visited as regularly by wildlife. Any type of birdbath or garden pond will do, as long as there are shallow spots (place flat rocks inside, if necessary) that give birds and small mammals a safe foothold. It's also important to protect your visitors from predators, so place your water source at least 15 feet from shrubbery that could harbor neighborhood cats.

SHELTER. Wildlife relies on shelter for protection from the weather and predators as well as for sleeping areas and safe travel lanes. Low shrubbery, especially berry bushes that also provide a food source, makes an effective shelter. If it is dense enough, shrubbery can provide a home to ground-nesting birds such as doves and thrushes as well as small mammals like rabbits. You can also construct a brush pile from dead branches, discarded Christmas trees and crape myrtle prunings to provide this kind of shelter. Stone piles will provide a cool home for garden snakes, toads and lizards — all of which help to control insect populations. Also, consider leaving one or two dead trees standing to attract cavity-nesters such as woodpeckers.

PLACES TO RAISE YOUNG. For the most part, this requirement can be satisfied by meeting basic shelter needs. The exception is birds, which benefit from nesting and roosting boxes. These can be purchased or made at home. Each species has specific requirements for entry-hole size, so contact your county extension office or the Georgia Wildlife Federation for instructions or plans for various types of nesting boxes.

concerns about possums or raccoons, but these creatures are typically nocturnal and don't impact a homeowner. Occasionally we have a rabies problem, so you have to be educated about recognizing atypical behavior."

A BUTTERFLY OASIS

Perhaps the most elegant form of wildlife gardening is butterfly gardening. In back of DeKalb County's Avondale Elementary School, brilliant flowers bloom from spring through fall, visited by vivid-winged butterflies that feed on the nectar they provide. Though packed into a small space, the butterfly garden is constantly a flutter of wings. It was designed by DeKalb resident Phoebe Stephens as a community project, required to complete the master gardener program she was enrolled in.

The most limiting factor for butterfly gardens is that they require full sun. Since Stephens was used to gardening in the shade at home, it took research to find the right plants. A fine art degree from Georgia State University helped her plan the design. Now, Stephens says, "this is my garden, and I don't have time for my yard at home."

According to Stephens, what most people overlook in butterfly gardening is providing for all stages of the butterfly's life cycle. "You need not only nectar plants for the adults but host plants for the caterpillars as well," she says. Host plants include parsley, fennel, dill and the tulip poplar tree. The adult butterfly lays its eggs directly on the host, knowing it will provide the right food source for the young caterpillar as it grows. Obviously this means no pesticides can be used in a butterfly garden.

Nectar plants for adult butterflies can include almost any flowering species, notes Stephens. Some of the most successful include butterfly bush (*Buddleia* species), butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), monarda and pentas. "What's most important about choosing plants is



A wire basket contains some of Angela Green's homemade bird food.



Green has arranged stones to provide shelter for small animals.

planning for a succession of bloom. You need blooms from early spring until frost." Phoebe suggests azaleas, the common violet and "Homestead Purple" verbena for early blooms. Late fall nectar plants include joe-pye weed (*Eupatorium purpureum*), goldenrod and Mexican sage. Many of the same plants that attract butterflies will also attract hummingbirds, whose food supply can be supplemented with a hummingbird feeder or two.

Other important elements of a butterfly garden include a "basking area" and water — perhaps in a shallow birdbath sitting on the ground, which reminds butterflies of the puddles where they like to hang out. When you see butterflies sitting on wet pavement, they are basking — getting at the salts that naturally leach out of concrete. At the Avondale garden Stephens has used a low birdbath for this purpose, filling it with damp sand to which table salt has been added.

A bowl of rotting fruit is another way to attract butterflies. Because they generally stay longer here than on a single flower, it's a good way to observe them or even take a few photographs to capture their ephemeral beauty.

SOURCES AND RESOURCES

Callaway Gardens

Education Department
Pine Mountain
(706) 663-5153

Georgia Wildlife Federation

1930 Iris Drive
Conyers
(770) 929-3350

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

1875 Century Blvd., Suite 410
(404) 679-7289
<http://www.fws.gov/~r4eao/>

BIRD FEEDERS AND NESTING BOXES

Hastings Nature & Garden Center

3920 Peachtree Road
(404) 321-6981

The Nature Station

913 Commercial St.
Conyers
(770) 922-9621

Wild Bird Adventures

Vinings Jubilee Shopping Center
4200 Paces Ferry Road
(770) 434-6191