

Make a Difference

By Ruth Richards
Coupeville resident

CREATING A BACKYARD WILDLIFE AND HUMAN SANCTUARY

When I moved to Whidbey Island from Vermont, a gardening and naturalist friend sent me off with a book called "Paradise Lot: Two Plant Geeks, One-Tenth of an Acre and the Making of an Edible Garden Oasis in the City" by Eric Toensmeier.

My friend knew I was going from a rural 70-acre homestead with Sugar Maples, a 3-acre commercial organic veggie operation, and a 5400 square-foot household garden, to an in-town 10,000 square-foot house lot. The Vermont land was also home to Black-throated Blue Warblers, Chestnut-sided Warblers, Hermit Thrushes, Barred Owls, Evening Grosbeaks, an American Bittern by the farm pond, and lots of other avian, insect, reptile and mammalian wildlife. As an avid gardener and bird-watcher, I had my work cut out for me to create a thriving garden and backyard wildlife sanctuary on my quarter-acre lot. But the idea of a tiny garden of eden, a paradise lot, lit up my imagination.

This sanctuary was going to fill out my plate and birding checklist. From a childhood spent outdoors, I have always valued a connection to the natural world. Author Richard Louv coined the phrase 'nature deficit disorder' which, while not a specific diagnosis, points up an alienation from nature he observes whose repercussions loom large as we become more urban and more tightly-tethered to our smart devices. His observations join many studies about the mental health benefits of interactions with nature.

I hoped, too, my yard would add an incremental link to other small areas offering sanctuary for wildlife in my neighborhood. For anyone who has flown over the US, it quickly becomes evident we have fragmented the landscape virtually everywhere. Habitat fragmentation has real consequences for natural systems. According to the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife, over 35,000 acres of wildlife habitat is converted to housing and other development each year in Washington. Doug Tallamy, a wildlife ecologist and entomologist at the University of Delaware, writes:

"We have destroyed natural habitat in so many places that local extinction is rampant and global extinction accelerating. This is a growing problem for humanity because it is the plants and animals around us that produce the life support we all depend on. Though vital as short-term refuges, nature preserves are not large enough to meet our ecological needs so we must restore the natural world where we live, work, and play. Because nearly 85% of the U.S. is privately owned, our private properties are an opportunity for long-term conservation if we design them to meet the needs of the life around us."

I was inspired by the idea that each of us can contribute to creating habitat, one backyard at a time. Our yards are opportunities for restoration, whether it be a house lot, school yard, or under-utilized parking lot.

The starting point

Before I could provide food, water and shelter for wildlife, I needed to research native plants, and figure out how to collect and store rainwater from my roof. The Whidbey Island Conservation District (WICD) was my go-to source. I worked with WICD staff to set up two 500-gallon water storage tanks that collect rain from the roof. This reservoir allows me to water plants through most of August. I consulted WICD's "Rain Garden Handbook for Western Washington" for native plant

information, and found the plants I wanted at their annual native plant sale and at several Whidbey nurseries.

In addition, I needed to eliminate the lawn and improve the soil on my lot. No prairie soil here, this was unconsolidated glacial till which bakes to a hard brick in summer, and creates a slick, mucky mess in wet weather. I covered areas of grass with a double layer of cardboard (remove all packing tape - it will haunt you!), and topped it with three to four inches of organic material. To date, I have brought on to the lot 80 yards of top soil, mulch, compost and wood chips. Occasional soil tests tell me the soil is improving little by little.

Challenges

I expected some of the challenges I met, and didn't anticipate others. Cats, rats and rabbits were unwelcome, but not devastating to the new plantings and garden, and they are manageable with on-going effort. Deer - no. The pressure from these herbivores necessitated fencing the lot. Nothing else deterred them effectively enough, although I tried every suggestion I could find.

Turning lawn into garden beds introduced me to wireworms. These are the larval form of click beetles, which live in the soil for four to seven years before maturing into the adult beetle form. They destroy young transplants and demoralize gardeners. The most effective, if somewhat labor-intensive, control I found is to trap the larvae with a buried chunk of potato in the spring and summer. I also hoped, eventually, the wildlife I was encouraging in the yard would assist in pest control.

The Results

Now in the sixth year of my project, I have logged 66 bird species seen or heard in, or from, my yard. Red-twig Dogwoods, Vine Maples, Red-flowering Currant, Ninebark, Serviceberry, and one Garry Oak are providing food and shelter for them and the insects they consume. I have watched American Robins choosing the Serviceberry fruits over the blueberries ripening nearby. I have committed to delaying end-of-season yard and garden clean-up until early spring to offer more feeding and shelter options for wildlife. I have kept thousands of gallons of water on my property. The raised garden beds provide us with vegetable bounty, and the yard is a place of sanctuary for the humans who live here, too.

What's next

I am reading materials from depave.org, a not-for-profit in Portland, Ore., dedicated to organizing crowd-powered removal of asphalt and replacement with gardens, native plantings and permeable surfaces. I have more driveway area than I want or need, and would rather see the extra space planted and creating more habitat. More permeable surfaces means reduced run-off and a healthier nearshore for our island home. It sounds to me like a win-win all around.

Resources for Whidbey residents:

Paradise Lot: paradiselotblog.wordpress.com/
Nature Deficit Disorder: www.youtube.com/watch?v=1e6_cY3-J3o

Washington Dept. of Fish & Wildlife: wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/living/backyard

Doug Tallamy: www.bringingnaturehome.net

Whidbey Island Conservation District: www.whidbeycd.org

De-paving: depave.org

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