



# FACT SHEET

## Beneficial Landscaping

The Benefits to Nature

March 1997

### Aren't grass and trees enough to benefit nature and wildlife?

Every plant species provides different benefits for the environment. Some plants take up nutrients in the soil, others deposit nutrients in the soil, and all offer different types of habitat and food sources. There are specific birds, insects, and wildlife that depend upon specific plants (or vice versa, such as bees and butterflies that pollinate flowers). On the other hand, the use of nonnative (exotic) plant species, coupled with high doses of pesticides and fertilizers, makes the modern lawn a biological near desert. The three primary Eurasian grass species that make up most lawns are of little use to most beneficial insects and animals. The relationship between plants and wildlife, or the food web, is destroyed or nonexistent when we use nonnative grasses, trees, and shrubbery that do not produce nutrients required by many species.



Also, in a natural setting, plants reach maturity and seed at different times of the year. For wildlife, that means that seeds and fruits are available the entire year. Unfortunately, with some lawns, seeds and fruits are available only during the summer growing season. Native plant species can also offer a greater variety of habitat and shelter for wildlife. Based on these factors, it is clear that to improve our environment and to enhance backyard habitats, manicured lawns should gradually be replaced with beneficial landscaping. More important, with close to 500 native plant species on the verge of extinction in North America, beneficial landscaping offers most of us a chance to do our part. If every one of the more than 30 million U.S. homeowners planted native species on just one-tenth an acre, almost 4 million acres of native plants would be restored. The influence on preservation efforts for plants, birds, and insects, would be spectacular.

### Is landscaping with native plants economical and affordable?

Landscaping with native plants is a very economical choice for several reasons. Native plants suited for this climate tend to do better and require less water and less upkeep. And mowing is not required. Thus, economic benefits include lower water bills and lower maintenance. You don't have to buy as much gasoline for the mower and you save money by not buying fertilizers/herbicides. The esthetic benefit is a beautiful, thriving landscape. In addition, with the proper placement of plants your landscape can conserve energy and save on heating and cooling costs for your home. By placing conifers—such as white spruce, black

hills spruce, and eastern white pine—on the north and west sides of your home, you reduce the cooling effect of harsh winter winds; by placing hardwoods—such as oaks, basswood, green ash, white ash, sugar maple, soft maple, or hackberry—on the south side of your home, you save on cooling costs because they provide shade in summer. An added environmental benefit is that these trees also provide shelter for birds in winter and nesting and cover in summer. Finally, don't forget the potential increase in property value when an area is beautifully landscaped!

### How affordable is beneficial landscaping and what are the easiest plants to purchase to get started?

If you would like to try a few plants to get started, try the 12 mentioned in the Chicago Wilderness "Nitty-gritty Details and Planting Instructions for a Dozen Basic Wildflowers and Grasses." They are: boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*), bottlebrush grass (*Hystrix patula*), butterflyweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), Culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*), little bluestem (*Andropogon scoparius*), mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum virginianum*), nodding wild onion (*Allium cernuum*), prairie

blazing star (*Liatris pycnostachya*), spotted joe pye weed (*Eupatorium maculatum*), sweet black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia subtomentosa*), wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), and yellow coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*).

Native plants may appear to be more expensive at first. However, in general, fewer seeds are necessary to cover an area, so it is important to look at the seed dispersal ratio for the specific area to be planted. (For rates, see your local nursery).

### Won't increasing wildlife in a backyard increase the number of pests as well?

Not really. In fact, you could attract particular wildlife that feeds on the pests in your yard. For instance, if you have a lot of mosquitoes or grasshoppers, you may want to attract purple martins, tree swallows, bluebirds, bats, frogs, or dragonflies which will feed on these insects. And don't let the idea of bats scare you. Bats are actually very good to have around because a

single bat can eat 3,000 to 7,000 insects per night! This might beat out your Bug Zapper by a long shot and save on electricity and on the cost of potentially harmful pesticides. To attract bats, put up a few bat houses that can be bought at nature stores, or make your own.

### What particular plants attract butterflies and wildlife?

There are several species of plants that will attract particular insects and wildlife, so it is best to pick up a more specific resource or talk with your local nursery to get the best match for your yard. However, here are a few ideas: For song birds, plant sunflowers (all species), blazing star (all species), white prairie clover, compass plant, prairie dock, big bluestem, little bluestem, sideoats grama, switch grass, prairie dropseed, downy service berry, hackberry, dogwood (all species), juniper (all species), elderberry, highbush cranberry, and hawthorn (all species).

For hummingbirds, try pale purple coneflower, spotted

jewelweed, wild lupine, bergamot-bee balm, foxglove, beardtongue, phlox (all species), false dragonhead, Ohio buckeye, gooseberry (all species), and trumpet honeysuckle.

To attract butterflies, try wild garlic, nodding onion, lead plant, common milkweed, white aster, pale purple coneflower, rattlesnake master, blazing star, bergamot-bee balm, white prairie clover, prairie phlox, mountain mint, black-eyed Susan, compass plant, prairie dock, spiderwort, prairie violet, little bluestem, sideoats grama, and switch grass. (This is just a beginning; it is not an inclusive list.)

### What kinds of questions should be asked about native plants?

A good question to ask is: "Are the plants local or shipped in?" This question is important because it is best to get plants locally grown —those that are best-suited for your conditions. Also, ask

if the plants do well in your soil type and lawn area (sunny, shady, moist, dry, etc.).

### What should be considered in deciding what to plant where?

To get the best results, follow some principles based on the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources handbook, *Landscaping for Wildlife*. The basic needs of wildlife include:

- **Function.** Plants have to be more than just pretty; they must provide nesting cover, edible fruits, butterfly nectar, grains, nuts, acorns, or something else beneficial to wildlife.
- **Diversity.** This will attract not only a greater variety of species, but also protect against one species doing poorly and against your whole landscape declining. While in some years one or two plants don't do so well, the others may thrive and provide beauty and wildlife benefits.

- **Seasonality.** Wildlife requires that the basic needs be supplied all year. Therefore, plant a combination, such as Black Hills spruce and white spruce for winter cover and summer nesting sites; Nanking cherry and American elderberry for summer fruits; red osier dogwood and mountain ash for fall fruits; and red splendor crabapple and American highbush cranberry for winter and spring fruits.

- **Layout.** Habitat must be considered for optimal use. This means that food plots and water should be near cover, or wildlife will be exposed to harsh weather or preyed upon while going for food and water. The prevailing winds, snow drifts, and soil erosion control should be considered as well. For example, prairie grasses provide excellent soil erosion control and nesting cover.



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