

## Wilding Your Garden

I recently gave a talk on habitat gardening titled, [Wilding Your Garden](#). Yes I know that the very title is controversial since the word [wilding](#) has a rather unpleasant meaning in the urban context, but I kept it because it comes closest to conveying the message of the talk.



This fierce-looking insect, a robber fly, is an amazing predator that as an adult catches its prey "on the fly." It lays in wait on the leaf of a toyon in my garden.

I knew that the gardeners attending this session were interested in learning about native plants that would be most effective in attracting birds, butterflies and hummingbirds to their gardens. My goal for the group, though, was to convince them that to attract these little pretties, they would need to change not only the plants they were growing but more importantly their approach to gardening. Although plants provide food for many critters, especially at certain times during their life cycle, most birds and many other animals need insect protein and fat for reproduction and to feed their

young.



During the summer phoebe's swoop near the ground under the oak tree, catching insects in mid air.

If we are serious about attracting and protecting birds, butterflies and hummingbirds, we need to get serious about both native plants and insects. Furthermore, we must not only include specific plants in our gardens, but we must mimic our local natural environment. That means allowing some dead branches to remain on trees and shrubs, and letting twigs, leaf litter and other organic debris accumulate on the ground. It means allowing organic matter to decompose to be recycled back into the environment. It means banishing mowers, blowers, and chainsaws from the land.

The case for habitat gardening is most thoroughly and eloquently made by Douglas Tallamy in his watershed book, [Bringing Nature Home](#). He points out that although many birds feed on berries and seeds, requiring high-energy food for migration or to make it through the winter season, most birds need fat and protein that comes from insects for reproduction and rearing their young.



We spent several months from spring through summer watching a hummingbird tend her nest and then feed her young. Even these birds need protein and fat for their young.

Similarly, although butterflies are attracted to a broad range of plants whose flowers provide high-energy nectar, caterpillars – the larval phase of the butterfly – often require a very specific host plant. The loss of butterfly species may not be due to a lack of appropriate nectar plants, but rather to the loss of specific larval host plants. In short, although plants with pretty berries, nutritious seeds and nectar-bearing flowers may feed birds and butterflies during a portion of their lives, many cannot survive without more specific host plants and an abundance of insects.



There was quite a ruckus beneath a shrub as this lizard did battle with a large beetle. The lizard whipped its head around beating the insect senseless and finally finishing it off. I did not get to see her dine, though. Can't imagine how she could consume something so large!

One can study individual birds and butterflies to determine specific needs, as good restoration ecologists must, but for the home gardener creating gardens using locally native plants that typically grow in association with each other is a most effective approach. Furthermore, removing or reducing lawn, and allowing our gardens to be a bit messy creates good habitat for a diversity of insects, lizards, and other critters necessary for the health of the birds and butterflies we so enjoy. Finally, this more naturalistic and holistic approach not only gives you a good excuse when your neighbor points out that your grass is not the greenest on the block, but it can increase your awareness and appreciation of the wild drama that plays out in the natural world of your garden.

For more resources, check out the last three slides of the [Wilding Your Garden](#) presentation and the list of [links to lists of plants that attract birds](#) (a mouthful!).



One day on my way out - and in a rush as well - I heard a sound right by the back gate. There I found this rather small spider wrapping up its prey. It took about five minutes for it to delicately wrap up its meal while swinging from its web. I stayed to watch, figuring that it was worth being a bit late. I can't remember now what I was in such a rush about but I will never forget watching this spider going about its important business.