

IMBY (In My Back Yard) – Plant Diversity and Growing a Native Garden

Ontario Nature

While backyard habitats cannot take the place of large wilderness areas, they can foster the diversity of wildlife populations in urban areas.

Consider the number and kinds of plants or animals living in or on a typical suburban lot. Basically you'll find lots of individuals — many blades of grass, several individuals of the same plant growing in a hedge, large populations of aphids or mites — but you won't find many different species. Now compare that with what you would find living in an abandoned lot or field, and you will get an idea of what diversity is all about.

Why is diversity important? The greater number of plant species you have in your yard, the greater the variety of animal life that will find it attractive. And the more species there are, the less likely it is that any of them, such as pest insects, will get out of hand. Not only that, but the greater the diversity in a given area, the greater the natural balance, and the less tending is needed. In other words, the less feeding, watering, cultivating and pest control. Any wildlife you wish to attract will require four basic elements: food, water, shelter, space. Each plant and animal species has preferences, but with careful planning you can create a diverse habitat that will appeal to many species. By encouraging a variety of plant life in your yard, you encourage a variety of animal life.

The plants with which you choose to landscape your yard should provide food and shelter for a variety of animals. Try to select a variety, with different heights and characteristics (such as textures and colours). Combining trees, shrubs, vines and herbaceous plants will increase the diversity of wildlife that is attracted to your yard. For instance, not all birds nest at the same level. Orioles and tanagers prefer tall trees, whereas thrashers and cardinals nest in shrubs, and sparrows like low-growing plants. It is best to choose plants that are native to your area as they tend to be better adapted to the climate, soil conditions and local pests and diseases. As a result, they generally require less water and less tending, and do not depend on pesticides to thrive. Another reason to choose native species is that a few exotic species such as purple loosestrife have adapted so well to our conditions that they are invading and threatening our native ecosystems.

Consult your local nursery or garden centre, master gardener, horticultural society or naturalist club for advice on the best methods of soil preparation, the species that will thrive in your area and the spacing requirements of the plants you select. You may also be able to purchase seedlings, bedding plants and wildflower seeds from your nursery. But before you buy, ask about the source of any plants, as removing plants from the wild disrupts native plant communities. Reputable dealers should be able to tell you where and how the plants were propagated. Society for Ecological Restoration (address in resource list) provides information on outlets where native stock can be purchased. North American Native Plant Society (address in resource list) may also be helpful in your search for seeds and/or bedding plants. They hold an annual sale of native plants and run a wildflower seed exchange. It is sometimes acceptable to remove plants from the wild in areas that are slated for development, such as subdivision, sewer and highway sites. However, proper

permission must be obtained from the developers and/or property owners. Food and cover can be provided at a variety of levels by layering trees of different sizes, shrubs, vines, and herbaceous plants. Within each category, there are certain considerations to remember.

www.ontarionature.org/pdf/backyard.pdf

Additional resources are available at

North American Native Plant Society www.nanps.org

Evergreen – Home Grounds www.evergreen.ca/en/hg/hg.html

Wild About Gardening www.wildaboutgardening.org