Sharing Space with Wild Neighbors

by Nancy Lawson

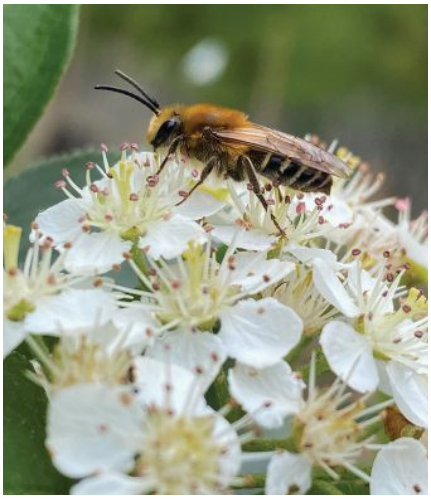
In the debut installment of this new column, Nancy Lawson, author of The Humane Gardener *and* Wildscape: Trilling Chipmunks, Beckoning Blooms, Salty Butterflies, and Other Sensory Wonders of Nature, *shares her philosophy on the benefits of viewing our gardens as extensions of the natural world and welcoming all that lives among us.*

My immediate neighbors are an eccentric bunch. They like to hide in shrubs and sleep among tall grasses. They chase each other up trees, bury food, and drop their children off in holes in the ground. They croak and chirp their way into my dreams at midnight and wake me up singing at 4 a.m. every spring.

The more I've gotten to know their countless quirky ways, the more I cherish these wilder inhabitants of our community. The lifestyles of birds, toads, squirrels, and grasshoppers might be different from mine, but their goals are the same: to find tasty food and cozy shelter, protect their families from harm, and communicate in languages all their own.

My plant neighbors are quieter, but they're just as rambunctious, filling every bare spot and crack in the sidewalk. They don't ask permission and I don't require it, for the very reason that plants in turn provide more homes to our fellow Earthlings than my efforts alone ever could.

What do we owe these wild neighbors who live among us, whose ancestors were here—wandering the land on foot, spreading underground through roots, and floating in the winds—long before people ever stepped onto the continent? How can we give back to the tiny cellophane bee mother who asks for so little in return for her pollination services, needing only a bare patch of ground for her nest and abundant pollen and nectar to feed her young? How can we make space for the chipmunks and voles who tunnel through our gardens, spreading seeds and spores of life-giving mycorrhizal fungi as they go? How can we ensure that the



From chipmunks, top left, to cellophane bees, top right, and goldfinches, above, all manner of creatures grace our gardens with their presence. Learning about their habits and needs will help us create welcoming habitat.

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box turtles who've walked the same few acres for generations, dining on slugs and dispersing mayapples, aren't crushed by the blades of our machinery?

These questions are all too rare in a culture where the defining goal of conventional landscaping is to blend into blandness and appease lawn-obsessed human neighbors. Since my husband and I first moved into our home in March 2000, we've worked hard to blend into nature instead, to be like the tree frog who changes color to match her natural environment. In 2014, I launched a career of helping others do the same, no matter where they live or what size their plots. It could be a balcony or it could be a 200-acre farm: Plants grow everywhere, and wherever plants grow, the animals are sure to follow.

At the core of my work is a philosophy that plants are the solution to many societal problems. We're all familiar with the role our green friends play in mitigating everything from climate change to depression. But if we let plants lead the way, they could also repair our distorted relationships with wildlife even in our own backyards. Native trees, shrubs, vines and wildflowers can ease tensions between gardeners and the creatures they often spar with: deer, rabbits, shrews, groundhogs, raccoons, javelinas, to name a few. Tasty plants serve as buffers that help protect cultivated gardens from herbivory. Less palatable plants, strategically placed, encourage would-be nibblers to move along. Vulnerable plants gain protection from nibbling when surrounded by better chemically or structurally defended species.

Too often, plants are cut off at the knees before they're ever given a chance to form these communities. Some of the very species that sustain mammals and reduce browsing pressure are just as maligned as the animals who depend on them: pokeweed, fleabanes, sumacs, blackberries, raspberries, mesquites, goldenrods and many others seen as too "rangy," too "prickly," or just too much.

Since the mid-20th century, a lexicon has developed around dividing the natural world into all-or-nothing categories, propped up by a multibillion-dollar lawn-and-pest-control industry that instills fear and loathing of anything that's not turf. Words like "weed," "damage," "messy," "overgrown," "aggressive," "pest," and "nuisance" capitalize on human tendencies to think in black and white terms, with little room for nuance. While writing my first book, I asked entomologists why the concept of "beneficial insects" was ever invented, as practically all insects are beneficial to someone. The answer was that it's simply a marketing term, dreamed up to persuade people to like at least some invertebrates.

The way we treat others, including our wild neighbors, reflects who we are as a culture. We can do better, and it often starts with having the courage to stand up and stand out from the human crowd. In this new column, we'll consider the world from the point of view of the wrens and fireflies who need the mosses, dried grasses, fallen leaves and other materials that are too often mowed or leaf-blown away. We'll explore how our gardens might look if the toads and solitary wasps and rabbits had their say. We'll discuss how to mitigate unintentional hazards to wildlife, and we'll focus on alternatives to trapping and other cruel and ultimately ineffective strategies for gardening among wildlife.

Most of all, we'll go beyond resistance and even coexistence to a new paradigm of celebration and appreciation—for all of the beauty, motion, sound, and abundance that our wild neighbors bring to our world. It takes patience and empathy, but it's possible to have our wildlife *and* our beautiful gardens, too. ■

Left: A wildlife garden includes a wide diversity of plants. Above: Green frogs and other amphibians need leaves and other natural materials for hiding, overwintering, and foraging at the bottom of ponds as well as on land.

Nancy Lawson is an author, naturalist, and founder of the Humane Gardener initiative (www.humanegardener.com). *She lives in Howard County, Maryland.*