

## GARDENING WITH WILDLIFE

### Creating a No-Hazard Zone

by Nancy Lawson

While hosting a native bee workshop at a local college last spring, I couldn't wait to lead the group outside for a little bee-watching exercise. Replete with pollinator pathways and a rain garden, the campus seemed like a great place for our group to observe fascinating insect life cycles.

As flower-filled as the grounds were, though, they turned out to include an unintended ecological trap. Amid the largest planting, solitary mother bees flew low in search of their recently excavated nests. We realized that all their efforts were for naught because their habitat had just been obscured by a thick layer of fresh wood mulch.

Though the landscape manager meant no harm in attempting to prevent weeds, the overzealous mulching came at a cost to the very creatures he'd wanted to welcome. Seventy percent of native bees nest in the ground, and adults live only days to weeks after emerging, so these little mamas didn't have time or energy to waste. The landscape budget would have been better spent on denser plantings and hand-weeding, strategies that can meet maintenance needs and protect bees at the same time.

As gardeners, it's impossible to cultivate land without causing some measure of disturbance along the way. But here are some suggestions for how patient observation and a few simple shifts can minimize potential harm to a wide variety of wildlife:

**Plant carefully and strategically.** Where possible, letting fallen leaves lie is a better mulching strategy, offering safe harbor to overwintering insects, including caterpillars and queen bumblebees. Disrupting rich leafy layers in early spring can easily dislodge the still-slumbering queens before they're ready, so it's best to move slowly, plant small plugs, or wait until tem-



**Above:** Young rabbits shelter under golden ragwort and leaf litter in a garden. **Left:** A ground-dwelling queen cellophane bee emerges from hibernation in spring.

peratures rise. Over time, growing native groundcovers around taller perennials and under shrubs and trees helps negate the need for any disturbance at all. These long-lasting layers also nurture a bounty for flickers, wood thrushes and other ground foragers while creating nesting spots for small mammals like rabbits too.

**Reduce mowing.** Without such pro-

tected areas, nesting rabbits may opt for shallow depressions in lawns. Mowing in spring and summer can easily destroy these hidden bunny families as well as reptiles and amphibians on the move. Since eliminating our lawn, we've routinely found mother turtles laying eggs in gardens, young turtles hiding in tall grasses, and baby toads and wood frogs as small as my thumbnail hopping among leaves and logs. If you aren't as far along in your transition to habitat, you can still mitigate mowing accidents by scouting your lawn prior to mowing.

**Prune selectively or wait.** Around the country, tree trimming is a significant threat to squirrels and birds, including woodpeckers who nest in dead limbs and



Scouting before mowing can help protect animals like this young box turtle.

hummingbirds whose lichen-covered nests are difficult to see. In southern California, Arizona, and Texas, the nests of hooded orioles, woven on the undersides of palm fronds, are vulnerable to being cut away. Inspecting plants first can help prevent such losses. Waiting until animals are no longer raising their young is an even better approach when possible.

Closer to the ground, bees are susceptible to obsessive spring cleaning; 30 percent of native bee species are cavity nesters, laying eggs in leftover stalks of

wildflowers like goldenrods and twigs of shrubs like raspberries. To nurture complete life cycles, cut spent wildflower stems down to 12 to 18 inches in late winter, let mother bees lay their eggs in them in spring, and then leave stalks up for yet another season to give the new generation time to develop into adult bees.

**Eliminate entanglements.** Each year, wildlife rehabilitation centers from coast to coast treat countless birds, snakes and other animals who become

entangled in garden netting, plastic deer fencing, and similar backyard hazards like volleyball and soccer nets. Safer alternatives for protecting plants from nibbling include welded-wire fencing or hardware cloth, with grids small enough to prevent animals from entering or large enough to admit safe passage.

**Mimic natural topography.** Water is life, but vertical-sided ponds and pools are death traps for creatures like amphibians, small mammals, and insects who are unable to scale the steep, slippery sides. “Frog logs” made of floating cushions with ramps will help these animals escape. Excavated garden ponds can be molded with gently sloping sides, but most prefabricated pond shells are made at dangerous 90-degree angles. You can make them safer by piling rocks around the inside edges, fashioning ramps out of logs and pieces of bark, and growing aquatic plants that small animals can climb.

**Leave baby animals alone.** To human eyes, lone young animals often seem in need of help, but most of the time they have not been abandoned. Deer and rabbit moms leave babies hidden among plants, usually returning from foraging only to nurse. Young, feathered birds are often learning to fly under the watchful eye of their parents. Featherless birds, on the other hand, may have just fallen out of the nest; if the nest is too high to reach, attach a shallow wicker basket to the tree, place the chick inside, and watch from a distance until parents find it. Signs of animal distress include shivering, crying, injuries, or a dead parent nearby, but before taking action, contact local rehabbers for advice and check [humanesociety.org/wildneighbors](http://humanesociety.org/wildneighbors) and [nwf.org](http://nwf.org).

From predation to disease to weather extremes, our wild neighbors face their share of natural hazards. By remembering that every inch of the world outside our doors is someone else’s home, we can avoid adding to these animals’ burdens and create safe havens in an increasingly fraught world. ■

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A green frog rests on a bark ramp in a garden pond. It is essential that water features have sloping edges or ramps that allow animals to exit safely.