

A Gardener's Year of Habitat Heroes

by Vera Strader

We gardeners are land managers for we hold sway over our little piece of planet, each determining what we will and will not grow. What we do with our yard and even window boxes counts more and more as habitat shrinks.

Together home gardens, fields, and farms can play a major role in countering the disappearance of forests, prairies, scrub, and the creatures that depend on them. Wildlife cannot catch a bus when homes are fragmented by roads and subdivisions, but many can adapt to nearby islands of food and cover.

To garden with Mother Nature rather than against her, tilt plantings toward our area's California Natives. Native plants are often the best since the creatures we hope to give a helping hand to, are also natives. Native plants reportedly support ten to fifty times more species of native wildlife than do nonnative plants, including insects which are the foundation of the wildlife food web. Insects and the myriad creatures that prey on them in turn supply fodder for countless additional lives.

Year-round habitat heroes are crowned by our native oaks, sometimes called the second Mother Lode. These trees are homes to millions of insects and spiders that, along with acorns, leaves, and bark, provide cover and nourishment for a remarkable 170 bird, 80 animal, and 60 amphibian and reptile species.

Countless other native plants--from towering pines and cedars to perennial bunch grasses--provide seeds, berries, and places to raise families, and protection from the elements. Old tree snags, brush piles, and leaf and twig litter bestow additional shelter. Include a reliable water source plus freedom from toxic pesticides and other pollutants, and wildlife can thrive and proliferate.

Spring slides into summer as native manzanitas and flowering gooseberries and currents beckon pollinators. Waves of wild flowers - California poppies, lupine, Ithuriel's spears (aka wally baskets), and countless others - follow to the delight of beneficial insects.

As days lengthen, California lilac, Oregon grape, and flame-blossomed redbud trees burst forth. Penstemon, sages, and columbine soon pitch in, augmented by "alien" pollinator-friendly flowers including rosemary, borage, lavender, and oregano.

Autumn wildlife uses this time to stoke up on calories and lay in winter supplies. Seeds of grasses and perennials mature, as do the fruits of elderberry, snowberry, Christmas berry, wild grapes, and even poison ivy and mistletoe. Nectar and pollen becomes dear, but asters, and native autumn sage, coyote bush, and California fuchsia come into their own.

As time goes on, savvy gardeners edit their yards to welcome a plethora of insects and other wildlife. Unfortunately today's expansive lawns and nursery hybrids with large, showy blossoms

are regularly bred to be unappealing to insects. Plant instead, old-fashioned, open-faced flowers that are more attractive to wildlife.

A world without bird song and bee hum is an environmental and economic catastrophe. Those creatures that make it in the long haul depend at least in part on us. As land managers, we can all make choices to support biodiversity, not only in own yards, but in open space, road sides, golf courses, parks, preserves and even in vacant lots.

Vera Strader delights in the many bugs, bees, and birds in her Sonora garden. She is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County.