

Habitations
By Susan Corey-McAlpine
UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County
02-23-2022

Enjoying the cusp of Spring, I delight in the White-breasted Nuthatches visiting the suet cage in quick little darts on the red Maple *Acer rubrum* trunk, and wonder where the pair will nest. In raking the depths of an old leaf pile, I find possible descendants of my worm-bin, red wiggler worms *Ensenia fetida*, actively mining the mulch. Moving old brick, I wonder where the California newts are this year, and I duck as the hummingbirds audibly zoom past for the feeder, which I kept faithfully full, clean, and protected against freezing this winter. I watch for the bluebird couple to return to their corner box near the Redbud tree *Cercis occidentalis*. The Missus has already checked the interior, and her mate inspects the roof and the fence line, all puffed up to protect his inspected territory. Perhaps one of the few advantages to our isolation is the opportunity it gives us to truly watch for, observe, and note behavioral patterns, in the wildlife that depends on our gardens.

Douglas W. Tallamy, in his book, Bringing Nature Home, emphasizes the importance of planting natives that satisfy all of a bird's needs; not just for nesting, but also in providing desired food insects in all of their life stages. He advocates for home gardens that bridge gaps between parks and preserves in providing habitats for native species. Birds may nest in your garden's birdhouses, but their residencies will be longer, or seasonal visits more dependable, if you provide them food, and not only in seasonal, commercial bird-mix feeders. I may observe the bluebirds nesting in the nest boxes on the perimeter fence, but they first came, and now stay, to eat the insect life in the ungrazed pasture -- that's where I see their brilliant blue flight. On the garden floor, the Spotted Towhees, Robins, and occasional varied Thrush comb through oak leaves of the Valley oak, *Quercus lobata* and the California black oak *Quercus Kelloggii* for food. They even perch on the yard cart to make sure none of the worm castings contain living food. My worm bins are perhaps emptied too often, straight into improved soil, covered in leaves or straw, so that the birds can dig for the freed bin inhabitants. I put up with more insect leaf damage, oak leaves and brush piles and other "messes", so that I can host a wider variety of birdlife for longer spans of time.

We keep honeybees in late spring through summer, and, although we enjoy their honey, I'm more appreciative of the wide variety of wild bees, flies, and wasps that also forage through the Columbines *Aquilegia formosa*, Echinaceas *Echinacea purpurea*, and Wild Lilac *Ceanothus spp.*

We are blessed to live near a mixed oak and conifer forest with Manzanita *Arctostaphylos spp.* and perhaps not-so-blessed to also host star thistle *Centaurea solstitialis*, Himalayan blackberry *Rubus armeniacus*, and Scotch broom *Cytisus scoparius*, which we patiently hand-hack at appropriate times. All these, even the pests we attempt to eradicate, serve as host, food, and shelter for a network of wildlife. I am satisfied that, even though I wonder where the hummers, the white-breasted nuthatches, and the California newts nest or lodge this spring, I've made progress in providing them a welcoming environment.

Master Gardener classes are offered monthly throughout the county. You can find our class schedule at: http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Public_Education_Classes/?calendar=yes&g=56698, and recorded classes on many gardening topics here: http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Public_Education/Classes/.

The Sherwood Demonstration Garden is open on Friday's and Saturday's from 9 a.m. –noon from March through October. Please check our website for more details
https://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/Demonstration_Garden/

Mark your calendar for our annual plant sales in April! Edible plant sale; including fruit, veggies and herbs will be on Saturday, April 16, 2022 8:00AM · 2:00PM. Choose your favorite edibles and shop our incredible tomato selection grown cared for locally by Master Gardener volunteers! The ornamental plant sale will take place on Saturday, April 30, 2022 8:00AM · 2:00PM. We will have a huge selection of trees, shrubs, grasses, succulents, native and perennial plants. Location: Sherwood Demonstration Garden 6699 Campus Drive, Placerville. <http://ucanr.edu/edcsale>

Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard to answer your questions. Leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512, or use the “Ask a Master Gardener” option on our website: mgeldorado.ucanr.edu. We'll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news.