

INFOSHEET

Creating habitat for wildlife in an outdoor learning environment (OLE) provides countless opportunities to teach children about environmental stewardship. Watching and observing wildlife encourages STEAM skillsets as children learn about life cycles, animal behavior, and local ecosystems. This Infosheet outlines different strategies for creating healthy wildlife habitat in OLEs, an investment that will benefit children and the planet for years to come!

STRATEGIES FOR ATTRACTING WILDLIFE

Plant in layers. To create high-value wildlife habitat, plant a variety of vegetation with different heights, flowering times, and growth forms. Vertical diversity ensures that different species have food sources and shelter throughout the year. A mix of ground covers, flowers, grasses, shrubs, and trees will draw many different species of wildlife that require environments for nesting, shelter, and food. Native solitary bees, for example, nest in holes in the ground or burrow in twigs and dead tree limbs; birds may nest in dense woody shrubs, in the bough of a tree, or in a hollow log.

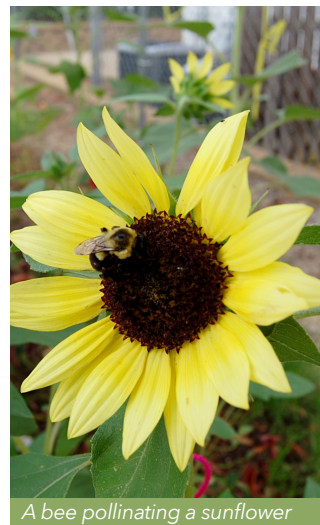
Year-round wild food. A diverse palette of plants will provide local wildlife with the food sources they need throughout the year. Select plants with different blooming periods. This will ensure that visiting pollinators, like bees and butterflies, have a continuous food source. In the cooler months, leave seed heads at the end of the growing season to provide an additional source of winter food for birds.

Native plants. Whenever possible, choose native plants to improve OLE wildlife habitat. Native plants are better adapted to their region, often requiring less water and little maintenance. Additionally, many pollinators, such as the iconic monarch butterfly, depend on very specific native plants for food. Native species will likely support a broader range of wildlife with the nuts, berries, seeds, pollen, and nectar that those plants provide. Check local Cooperative Extensions for native plant lists and additional resources.

Go pesticide-free. Many wildlife species are negatively effected by commonly applied insecticides and pesticides, so use organic, integrated pest management practices whenever possible. If an insecticide is necessary, apply them at night, when many pollinators are no longer active. Organic pest management will keep both wildlife and children healthy.



Hunting for wildlife in a naturalized outdoor play area



A bee pollinating a sunflower



A monarch on tropical milkweed



Creating a toad house using natural loose parts

Additional shelters and feeders. Bird and butterfly feeders can provide wonderful opportunities for children to observe wildlife. If possible, locate bird feeders and/or seed-producing perennials close to the classroom window for children to observe. They will be fascinated. Locate within 10–15 feet of shrubby vegetation to provide shelter from predators. Make a bird house, bird feeder, bee "hotel," or toad house with children and see their interest in wildlife grow.

RECOMMENDED PLANT LIST FOR POLLINATORS AND WILDLIFE:

Perennial Flowering Plants:

Anise hyssop, *Agastache* spp.
 Aster, *Aster* spp.
 Beebalm, *Monarda didyma*
 Black-eyed susan, *Rudbeckia hirta*
 Butterfly bush, *Buddleja davidii*
 Cardinal flower, *Lobelia cardinalis*
 Coreopsis, *Coreopsis* spp.
 Goldenrod, *Solidago* spp.
 Liatris, *Liatris spicata*
 Purple coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea*
 Purple-top verbena, *Verbena bonariensis*
 Salvia, *Salvia greggii*
 Sunflower, *Helianthus annuus*
 Yarrow, *Achillea millefolium*

Shrubs:

American beautyberry, *Callicarpa dichotima*
 Arrow-wood viburnum, *Viburnum dentatum*
 Blackhaw, *Viburnum prunifolium*
 Blueberry, *Vaccinium* spp.
 Ninebark, *Physocarpus opulifolius*
 Spicebush, *Lindera benzoin*
 Staghorn sumac, *Rhus typhina*
 Virginia sweetspire, *Itea virginica*
 Wax myrtle, *Morella cerifera*

Trees:

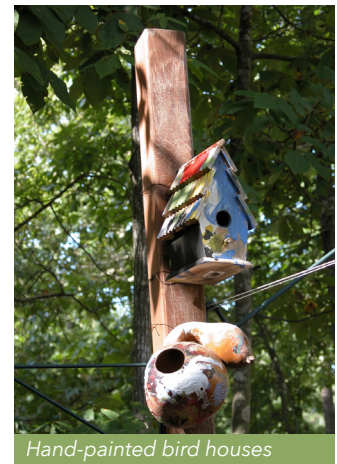
Cornelian cherry, *Cornus mas*
 Dogwood, *Cornus florida*
 Eastern redbud, *Cercis canadensis*
 Eastern red cedar, *Juniperus virginiana*
 Red maple, *Acer rubrum*
 River birch, *Betula nigra*
 Sweetbay magnolia, *Magnolia virginiana*
 Serviceberry, *Amelanchier* spp.
 White oak, *Quercus alba*



A gray catbird on a fruiting shrub



Bee hotel made from bamboo



Hand-painted bird houses



Children are fascinated by the small critters that inhabit OLEs naturalized with native plants.

RESOURCES

1. NCSU Cooperative Extension Native Plant Resources: <https://gardening.ces.ncsu.edu/native-plant-resources/>
2. Gardening for Wildlife: <https://www.nwf.org/Home/Garden-for-Wildlife/Create>
3. The Audubon Society: <https://www.audubon.org/conservation/bird-friendly-communities>

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