Creating Your Own Backyard Habitat
You can make your yard into a sanctuary for both you and your wild friends. Planting native flowers, shrubs, and trees can make attractive spaces for you and create habitat that invites in wildlife.

**Home Habitat Check List**
The National Wildlife Federation recommends the following elements to make a wildlife-friendly garden:

- **FOOD**: Native trees, shrubs, and wildflowers provide seeds, berries, nuts, and nectar for wildlife.

- **WATER**: A birdbath, fountain, or butterfly puddler is an attractive addition to your garden and can help wildlife. Consider a pond or rain garden for larger yards.

- **COVER**: Shrubs, low foliage, rock walls, and evergreens provide for a variety of wildlife. A brush pile or leaf litter can support many creatures.

- **PLACES FOR YOUNG**: Trees, shrubs, ponds, water gardens, and bird houses all provide home for wildlife to raise their young. Butterfly host plants are necessary for caterpillars to grow.

- **SUSTAINABILITY**: Reduce the use of pesticides, fertilizers, and other chemicals in your yard. Reduce water usage by using mulch, mowing less often, and reducing the size of your lawn. Composting leaves and yard trimmings is a great way to recycle nutrients.
THE KEY STEPS TO CREATE A NATIVE GARDEN:

1. Assess your yard
2. Design a haven
3. Prepare the site
4. Choose native plants
5. Prepare the soil
6. Prepare for wildlife

1. ASSESS YOUR YARD
Map out the key features of your yard, taking note of the following conditions:

**SUN:** Areas that get 6+ hours of sun are good for sun-loving plants.

**SHADE:** Partial shade means providing just a few hours of direct sun during the day. Many plants are tolerant of part shade. Full shade areas have little to no exposure from direct sunlight.

**WET/DRY:** It’s important to be aware of areas in your yard that are wet frequently. Areas that tend to collect water or stay moist will be more suitable for wetland plants.

**SOIL:** If your yard is in a new subdivision or recently developed, your soil may be compacted. You may need to amend the soil with organic materials like compost or peat, particularly if you are growing shade-loving plants that prefer rich soils.
2. DESIGN A HAVEN FOR YOU AND WILDLIFE

Plan out your needs.
Plan and sketch your dream yard!
Consider the following:

- Where will you entertain?
- Where do you want shade?
- Where is the best place for flowers?
- Do you need privacy?
- How much grass do you really need?
- What are the common walking paths?
- Do you want to locate food, water and cover?
- Are there any existing non-native plants that can be removed?

Limit grass.
On average, typical suburban yards are 60% lawn. Lawn produces little food, has no diversity of plants. It also requires frequent mowing and often the use of fertilizers, herbicides, or pesticides.

Make natural look intentional.
Planned properly, a native garden can look both beautiful and intentional. Here are some tips to help make your garden attractive:

- Put in borders, paths, or a low fence to clearly mark where gardens start and stop.
- Place plants carefully in groups and by height.
- Plan for plants to bloom spring, summer, and fall.
- Add sculptures, signs, and seating to show that the space is not only beautiful, but also useful.
- Talk to your neighbors—tell them what you are up to!

Start small.
If you have a big yard you can make over, that’s awesome! But even a homeowner with just a small yard, deck, or patio can help. Consider using native plants in pots or window boxes to support local pollinators.
3. PREPARE YOUR SITE

Identify and clear invasive plants.
Invasive plants often outcompete native plants resulting in damage to the environment and native wildlife. These plants are particularly a problem when ground has been disturbed, such as when planting new gardens. What’s a homeowner to do?

Find out what is growing in your yard. The Ohio Invasive Plants Council (www.oipc.info) has fact sheets to help you identify any plants in your yard.

Common Invasive Plants
• Bush Honeysuckle
• Japanese Honeysuckle
• Privet
• Oriental Bittersweet
• Autumn Olive
• Multiflora Rose
• Garlic Mustard
• Burning Bush

Do your homework.
Different plants have unique characteristics which lend themselves to different removal tactics.

Stay vigilant.
By their nature, these plants will come back quickly when given a chance. Monitor your new garden for any sign of plant invaders.
4. CHOOSE NATIVE PLANTS

Native Plants = Native Food
Native plants are the best source of food and shelter for native wildlife because they evolve together. Many “ornamental” plants found in garden stores are from Eurasia and are not useful for native North American wildlife.

Plants for Shade
To find plants that will thrive in full shade, look for plants, understory trees, and shrubs that grow naturally in Ohio forests.

Shade perennials and flowers
- Beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*): Clusters of small trumpet shaped flowers, which attract hummingbirds.
- Phlox (*Phlox spp.*): Available in many flower colors and a great source of nectar for pollinators.
- Virginia Bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*): Blue-flowered early spring bloomer provides nectar for bumblebees and moths.
- Wood Poppy (*Stylophorum diphyllum*): Attractive foliage and yellow flowers that are not bothered by deer.

Shade ground covers
- Virginia Creeper vine (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*): A great ground cover that also climbs trees without harming them, provides fall color and fruit for wildlife.
- Common Blue Violet (*Viola sororia*): An early-blooming ground cover that also attracts Fritillary butterflies.
- Eastern Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*): A fast-spreading perennial that attracts hummingbirds.
- Wild Ginger (*Asarum canadense*): A moderately slow-growing ground cover with big heart-shaped leaves. Deer resistant and an alternate host for the Pipevine Swallowtail Butterfly.
Shade shrubs/small trees

- **Spicebush** (*Lindera benzoin*): Host to both the Spicebush Swallowtail and the Eastern Tiger Swallowtail. Spicebush provides food for many types of wildlife with its spring flowers and fall berries. Its vibrant fall color makes it a beautiful replacement for invasive plants like Burning Bush.

- **Flowering Dogwood and Gray Dogwood** (*Cornus florida* and *Cornus racemose*): Beautiful white blossoms herald spring while providing early food for bees and butterflies. Fall fruits are a favorite of bluebirds and waxwings.

- **Pawpaw** (*Asimina triloba*): A low-growing tree that produces edible fruits with a tropical flavor and is a host plant for zebra swallowtail.

- **Viburnums** (*Viburnum spp.*), **Ninebark** (*Physocarpus opulifolius*) and **Oak Leaf Hydrangea** (*Hydrangea quercifolia*): Showy white clusters of blooms for pollinators in spring that produces seeds or berries in the fall for birds.
Sun perennials and flowers

- **Milkweed** (*Asclepias spp.*) including Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*): Vibrant flowers attract a plethora of insect life. Monarch butterfly caterpillars are picky eaters. They only eat plants in the milkweed family.
- **Coneflowers** (*Echinacea spp. and Rudbeckia spp.*): Coneflowers make a beautiful splash of color from midsummer to frost. Their flowers provide nectar and pollen for bees and butterflies and, if left to go to seed, provide food for goldfinches and other birds in the fall and winter.
- **Asters** (*Aster spp.*): Fall-blooming perennial that attracts a variety of butterflies and pollinators.
- **Coreopsis** (*Coreopsis spp.*): A long-blooming perennial with yellow flowers that makes a great substitute in your garden for non-native daylilies.
- **Native grasses** such as Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), Indian Grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), and Prairie Dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*): Perennial grasses form mounds of slender stems and produce beautiful seed heads.
Sun shrubs

- American Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*): A tall, fall-blooming, deciduous shrub that can be used for privacy screening. It produces fragrant, yellow flowers with petals that resemble crumpled strips and greenish seed capsules that mature to light brown and provide a great food source for birds.
- Serviceberry (*Amelanchier spp.*): A perennial shrub that produces spring flowers and late summer berries; attracts a variety of birds including Chickadees and Jays.
- American Hazelnut (*Corylus americana*): Another great privacy hedge option that also provides beautiful fall color.

Sun trees

- Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*): Popular with birds and butterflies, this tree produces a small purple fruit eaten by birds and small mammals.
- Oak (*Quercus spp.*): There are many species of native oak trees in Ohio and they support more than 500 species of caterpillars and more than 100 species of birds and mammals.
- Eastern Red-Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*): A tall evergreen tree that produces small blue fruits and has dense foliage that is good cover for birds.
- Willows (*Salix spp.*): Fast growing and good for wet areas.
5. PREPARE THE SOIL
The amount of amendments your soil needs will depend on its current condition and plant species you wish to plant:

- If you live in a newer development, your ground may be compact from construction. It will need to be loosened and amended with topsoil or compost to allow for better water and root penetration. Amending the soil is particularly important if you are growing shade-loving plants that require rich soils found in forests.

- If you are revamping an existing bed, it’s likely there is already a good layer of composted mulch. You will only need a 1-2 inch layer of mulch after planting to suppress weeds and keep the ground moist while transplants get established.

The primary goal is to disturb the soil as little as possible to avoid damage to soil fungi and microbes that are beneficial to plant growth and health.
6. PREPARE FOR WILDLIFE
Once your yard has native habitat, wildlife will discover it and make it home. However, there are ways to assist the wildlife once they arrive:

**Keep cats indoors.**
Cats are natural hunters and kill millions of songbirds and small mammals each year. Keeping them indoors helps keep cats safer, too.

**Keep the lights low.**
Outdoor night lighting can confuse migrating birds. Turn your outdoor lights off and shut your shades at night whenever safety allows.

**Watch for window strikes.**
Some windows reflect the open sky, fooling birds and causing them to fly into the window. Consider opening horizontal or vertical blinds half-way to break up the reflection or installing bird-saver curtains (www.birdsavers.com).

Tell others!
Once your yard contains the essential elements of food, water, cover, and a place for wildlife to raise young AND you use sustainable gardening practices, your yard may qualify as a National Wildlife Federation Certified Wildlife Habitat®. If you become certified, you will then have the option of purchasing a Cincinnati Nature Center or NWF sign to post in your yard to share the good news with your neighbors.
Cincinnati Nature Center Plant NATIVE! Propagation Program
The goal of this initiative is to make plants, seeds, and programs available to homeowners, schools, businesses, churches, and garden clubs. Our native plant sales are held in the spring and autumn each year. Be sure to stop by the Rowe Visitor Center and check out what we have in stock! Visit www.CincyNature.org to see what native plant and wildlife gardening programs are available.