

All Creatures Great and Small

Even though our business deals primarily with plants, one of the things we enjoy most about our landscaping is the different types of wildlife that it attracts. Whether your home is surrounded by cultivated farm fields or manicured lawns and pavement, our landscape plants have become an oasis for all kinds of birds, mammals, insects, reptiles and amphibians. Folks are quick to point out that sometimes a few of these critters can become a nuisance but the interest and entertainment these creatures can provide is priceless to those of us who enjoy them. The morning doves, cardinals and grackles love the evergreens in our windbreak. We've planted staghorn sumac for its berries that our resident blue birds prefer. Several years ago a pair of mocking birds chose our landscape as a place to raise a family. They, or several of their young, have been back to nest every year since. Robins, blue jays, and cedar waxwings love the fruit and berries produced by many of the shrubs and trees here at the nursery. Finches, nut hatches, chickadees, and an endless variety of sparrows love to feast on the ornamental grass blooms and spent perennial flowers in the fall and winter. The spring and fall migration (March and November especially) is great for spotting birds you wouldn't normally see. A Rousful-Sided-Towhee, a Rosey-Breasted Grosbeak; one year, on Thanksgiving morning, we watched an entire flock of migrating Cedar Waxwings clean the berries off the Winter King Hawthorn tree right outside our bedroom window. Even the owl and hawks are attracted to the hunting opportunities our backyard environment has to offer. (It may not be pleasant, but it's certainly interesting to watch a hawk nab a sparrow off the top of your bird feeder!)

Speaking of migrations, have you ever seen on one of those nature shows how the Monarch butterflies will gather together by the thousands in the fall to migrate amass, to the south? We witnessed this two years ago in September. Apparently they liked the calm warm space created on the down-wind side of our large evergreen trees. For about a week, there was a living cloud of orange and black in the trees and shrubs behind the house. Then, as suddenly as they appeared, one morning they were gone. This year, already in March, we saw the first butterfly of the season. It was attracted to the sap flowing from a fresh pruning cut on our backyard sugar maple. Butterflies, normally though, prefer the hot weather later in the summer. Mid to late summer flowering shrubs and perennials tend to attract the widest variety. Sweetspire, summersweet, rose of Sharon, aster, sedum, coneflower and bee balm are butterfly magnets.

Other insects too, are attracted to the nectar and pollen from these same flowers. Bees and beetles in dozens of sizes, shapes, and colors can be studied "up close and personal" while they are preoccupied with feeding, and like the owls and hawks, the predators of the insect world take advantage of the situation. The praying mantis seemed quite abundant everywhere last year. And would summer really seem complete without the fireflies and the songs of the cicadas?

Is it possible that some don't find insects as fascinating as we do? Then how about hummingbirds? These high strung little acrobats appear so dainty and cute but when several are competing for the same flowers, watch out! Hummingbird with an attitude! Any plant with pink or red trumpet shaped flowers or a strategically located feeder, can provide hours of entertainment. Coral Bells, honeysuckle, trumpet vine, bee balm, and wegelia are particular favorites.

If you're really into observing backyard wildlife, incorporating some type of water feature into your landscape will take it to the next level! Frogs, salamanders, turtles, and crayfish are subtle additions to the backyard wildlife assortment. Even the small amount of water available in a bird bath or garden fountain can bring creatures into view that you'd otherwise not notice.

What! You don't like spiders and snakes? It's the furry creatures that it takes for you to enjoy backyard wildlife? The small mammals, squirrels, chipmunks, and rabbits are cute little fellas to watch, but they have a tendency to reproduce like ...well you know. A few of these are fun, although too many can become destructive in a hurry. But watching the red fox trot through the nursery looking for rodents; listening to a coyote howl in the windbreak just outside our bedroom window; and the cold, snowy November night when a huge buck stepped out of the trees into the opening behind the house, are all memories we'll never forget.