

IN THE GARDEN

In Beverly Hills, a Haven for Wildlife



J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times

Not far from downtown Beverly Hills, the backyard of Susan Gottlieb is a haven for plants and animals, from flowers and cactuses, to birds, snakes and an occasional bobcat.

SUSAN GOTTLIEB has always considered herself a friend to animals, but her idea of friendship may go beyond the norm. She does not have a mere cat or dog padding around the 1960s house here that she shares with her husband, Dan. Her one-acre backyard is a haven for animals that most people would not consider appealing guests, including bobcats, gopher snakes, cottontail rabbits, bats, honeybees and the occasional coyote.

She attracted the animals by putting in plants that are inviting to them as food or habitat. Her property has been certified as wildlife habitat by the National Wildlife Federation, one of the country's biggest environmental groups. →

The federation has certified more than 100,000 habitats, including 153 acres of woods and fields owned by Martha Stewart in Katonah, N.Y., Disney's Animal Kingdom in Florida and more than a few city window boxes. While most certified habitats are in outer suburbia or in the country, the Gottliebs are just a five-minute drive from downtown Beverly Hills.

When she and her husband bought the house 22 years ago, Ms. Gottlieb was determined to transform the backyard into a home for native birds. "I love watching birds," she said. "That's how it all started. I wanted to attract native birds to the yard and conserve water." Ms. Gottlieb, who is 61 and a retired nurse, had never been a gardener, but she had been interested in birds since her childhood in rural Ontario, where her mother gardened in summer and put food out for birds in winter.

While her husband went off to work every day — he is a partner in a real estate company — she took charge of the garden, reading as much as she could about native plants.

In redoing the land, her first priority was to use less water. "The yard was not a mess," she said. "It just had a lot of ivy in it and was landscaped with tropical plants. So, if you like that kind of thing and don't mind a lot of water usage, it works." She, however, does not like that kind of thing. "I have a friend I call the Ornamental Queen," Ms. Gottlieb said. "She has tons of exotic ornamental plants in her garden, and she waters them every morning at 6 a.m. It just doesn't appeal to me."

Initially, building a wildlife habitat wasn't part of her plan. But she soon realized that native plants, while using very little water, would also attract wildlife far beyond the birds that prompted her initial interest.

Exotic plants don't attract native insects, and insects, Ms. Gottlieb notes, "are the basis for everything," helping to pollinate the plants while offering sustenance for birds and small animals. Plants that are not native "just don't provide enough food for them, and without the insects, we wouldn't have the birds and other animals they draw to the yard."



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She remade the garden slowly, learning not only from books but also from other enthusiasts for native gardening. She started by replacing most of the azaleas and roses near her house with succulents, including cactuses, agaves and mesquite trees. She left some roses, and soon found they could survive without much water. Now, when she wants them pruned, she just opens the garden gate, and the deer do the work.

Designed as a series of spaces, the Gottliebs' yard includes native grasses, a rock garden and several spare-looking areas planted with cactuses, as well as the rose garden, thick with flowers. In one section, bluebird nesting boxes line a trail; in another, hummingbird feeding bottles hang from a pole. Water moves through fountains and birdbaths, to attract birds and small animals. A steep hillside covered with shrubs and grasses faces the mountains in the distance.

Just last summer, she spotted her first western bluebirds, which are native to the region, but haven't been seen much for decades. The new bluebird trail with its native grasses attracted them, she said. "They like grassy meadows to hunt for bugs and worms," she said.

Of course, having bobcats visit one's backyard can create difficult conditions for the family pet. To make the outdoors accessible but safe for their four cats — Spike, Shadow, Angel and Cleopatra — the Gottliebs built a large enclosed cat run. It goes over the roof and into the garden, sheltering the cats from the bobcats that occasionally prowl the yard, while also protecting the birds from the cats.

For the most part, it has worked, although there was a day when the Gottliebs heard loud hisses coming from the entrance hall of the house and found all four cats surrounding a three-foot gopher snake on the tiled floor.

"Gopher snakes look a lot like rattlesnakes without the rattles and venom," Ms. Gottlieb said. "It was a bit alarming." Using a big stick, Mr. Gottlieb picked it up, placed it in the garden and watched it slither away. "Gopher snakes are actually good," Ms. Gottlieb said. "While we don't want them in our house, it's good to see them in the garden because they keep rattlesnakes away."

While a backyard filled with insects may not seem desirable to most people, she finds bugs wonderful to watch, and there are benefits other than visual. The bees are so small that they are not intimidating, and the mosquitoes are basically nonexistent. "Mosquitoes and other insects are eaten by the birds, lizards and bats that inhabit the garden," she said.

Defining "natural" is a continuing process. She doesn't leave nature entirely alone. She fills her hummingbird feeders with sugar water, using up to 25 pounds of sugar a week. She also leaves out small dishes filled with mealworms and larvae for bluebirds and other bug-eating birds. She says the birds could survive on the native plants alone, but "you get more birds and a better variety by putting out food." Still, the purist in her is thinking about cutting back on the snacks, to



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An enclosed cat run protects her pet cats, including Shadow, above.

encourage the birds to be self-sufficient. (David Mizejewski of the National Wildlife Federation said that the organization accepts "moderate, responsible bird feeding, but we really emphasize that a feeder doesn't equal habitat.")

Now that most of the groundwork is done, she spends about 10 to 12 hours a week in the garden, with part-time help from two gardeners. They mostly do maintenance work, spending 10 hours each week in the garden. Most of the work consists of pruning, cleaning up and labeling plants for the local gardening tours that come through.

This year the couple's environmental efforts have taken a new direction. In March they opened G2 Gallery in nearby Venice, Calif., selling photographs of nature and wildlife and donating the proceeds to conservation groups.

Looking back on the nearly two decades it took to create her backyard habitat, she considers how much she has learned about the plants and animals that populated the area in the centuries before "90210." "It's been a real education," she said. →

Want to Attract a Wilder Crowd?

Since 1973, the National Wildlife Federation has issued nearly 110,000 certificates for wild habitat. The program is designed to be more educational than rigorous. Fill out a quick questionnaire on the Web site, pay a \$15 fee and get a “personalized certificate” along with membership in the organization.

To be certified, a gardener must report that the habitat offers at least three forms of food for wildlife including water, insects and plants. Flowers that pollinate, for example, are a good source of food for many insects. Even window boxes can receive certification because they have water from the rain and flowers that attract insects, and the insects that visit are a good

source of food for the birds. Wildlife sites also must provide shelter for visitors. Shelter can take the form of small plants and trees.

The gardener must also practice at least two forms of sustainable gardening, whether conserving soil and water, controlling exotic species or using organic gardening.

“Even in cities, people can create wildlife areas,” says David Mizejewski, a naturalist and spokesman for the organization. “A window box — even though it’s small — can provide food and shelter to insects and birds,” and the gardener can choose plants that don’t require much watering.



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