

Step by Step Instructions for Changing Your Lawn into a Wildlife Habitat

INTRODUCTION

Prior to making your plan, please be sure to check with your local agencies and insurance company for current guidelines regarding fire requirements.

The process of transitioning your yard into a wildlife habitat can seem overwhelming, but as seasoned landscape designer Trish Munro says, “Any yard renovation can seem daunting, and it can become expensive ~ especially if you are adding hardscape. Don’t be threatened or overwhelmed; simply work in stages. Be sure to have a general plan and map out what you will be doing in each phase so that in the end your yard will all tie together.”

Having your yard prepared in advance will make the transition from a lawn to a bird-friendly habitat *much* easier. This document offers information about the different aspects for consideration – from initial planning to soil preparation, plant selection to planting tips, watering to mulch selection, and resources available to make your transformation successful.

California native plants not only provide habitat for our native birds, they provide the right kind of sustenance such as native insects. This is especially important during nesting season as even our “seed eaters” feed insects to their babies. This promotes brain development! Fruit bearing native plants (such as toyon) provide berries that contain the right kind of fats and nutrients for our local and migratory birds.

A well-designed, “useful” habitat can become an extremely productive location for insects, pollinators, birds and other wildlife. Even if you aren’t planning an *entire* renovation, adding a few key California native plants can be incredibly useful for the birds. Water and shelter complete the circle and add to the productivity of your garden. California native plants attract our native insects. This is an important point to consider when it comes to our native and migratory birds.

Ideally, if you can plan to install your plants immediately after the first rainstorm that brings ¼ inch of rain, you will have nature on your side, and your plants will flourish. On average this happens in mid-October *BUT* it may be as late as December, so keep an eye on the weather once you are ready to plant!

INITIAL PLANNING STAGES

As you begin to dream about your ideal garden space, make sketches and jot down your ideas in a notebook, on your phone, or on your computer. Planning well in advance will allow you to create your outdoor paradise. Think of some general goals you want to accomplish, for example, a serene outdoor escape, a formal English garden look, a natural/wild looking meadow, etc. Are there particular birds you would like to attract? Do you enjoy watching pollinators? Do you enjoy the sound of water? Moving water is a **FABULOUS** way to attract our feathered friends. You don’t have to redo your entire lawn. Consider starting with just the front, or perhaps a neglected space between your driveway and a fence.

Note: Hardscape has no time element but needs to be complete before planting. Hardscape construction is often destructive to plants.

1. Sketch out your space, with notes on what general types of plants should go where.
 - a. Note things such as:

- i. The amount of sunlight the area receives each day and how that might change over the course of the year.
- ii. The amount of water your area usually gets – either due to your watering system, runoff from your roof, runoff from your driveway, runoff from your neighbors, yard, etc.
- iii. The height and types of plants that would look good or be functional in the space (i.e. a sprawling tree, climbing vines, dense shrubs)

CHOOSING YOUR PLANTS

An ideal strategy is to choose a variety of plants that will offer color and visual interest throughout seasons. Not only does this strategy make your garden more pleasing to the eye; it layers the sustenance in your garden throughout the entire year.

Here are a few examples: *Zauchneria* (now *Epilobium* ~ AKA California fuchsia) is a showy late summer plant whose beautiful red-orange flowers bloom profusely into the autumn providing sustenance for pollinators when other plants have stopped blooming. *Solidago* (goldenrod) is also a late summer/fall bloomer. The butterflies will thank you for the blossoms AND the goldfinches (and other seedeaters) will be thrilled to feast once the plant has gone to seed! In early winter, the delicate pink bell-shaped flowers of the *Arctostaphylos* (manzanita) and also *Ribes* take over the job of providing nectar for the pollinators. These “bridge plants” are important plants to consider for your bird-friendly garden.

Go online to visit websites to learn about the different types of natives that might work well in your new planting area *and* meet your goals for your space. Keep an open mind as you make your selections; there are many varieties to choose from that will accomplish the same things in your garden.

Here are some of our favorite websites:

<https://theodorepayne.org/>

Theodore Payne Foundation has it all – classes, plant information, a fabulous nursery, and more...

<https://calscape.org/>

Calscape (from CNPS / California Native Plant Society) allows to enter your ZIP CODE so you can narrow your search and select plants that are just right for your location. Along with typical landscaping information about each plant, (size, water and soil requirements, etc.) this site actually lists the specific wildlife each plant supports!

<https://chapters.cnps.org/channelislands/resources/>

The California Native Plant Society - Channel Islands is an awesome resource. Check out their website for tips on plants, planting, and fire information.

<https://ovlc.org/rewild-resources>

Rewild Ojai (a part of the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy) also has fantastic resources and offers plants for sale. They also offer classes and seminars.

<https://www.laspilitas.com/>

If you are looking for specific information on plants, **Las Pilitas** nursery has great info on their site.

<https://www.matilijanursery.com/>

Matilija Nursery often carries locally sourced plants. The website is also a good resource for plant information. This nursery is a source for Lawns to Habitat Grantees.

<https://turningpointfoundation.org/growingworks.html>

Growing Works is a local nursery with great quality plants too. This nursery is also a source for Lawns to Habitat Grantees. The nursery is open twice a month for retail traffic.

<https://www.anniesannuals.com/grasses-and-foliage-california-natives.html>

Annie's Annuals has a specific section on California natives. They are a retail nursery who does mail order.

Visiting a botanic garden is another great way to help you plan your California native plant landscape. Viewing mature plants in these gardens will give you an idea of scale and arrangement.

- Conejo Valley Botanic Garden: <http://conejogarden.org/>
- Ventura Botanical Gardens <https://venturabotanicalgardens.com/>
- Santa Barbara Botanic Garden and Nursery: <https://www.sbbg.org/>
- California Botanic Garden and Nursery (Claremont): <https://www.rsabg.org/>

Once you have a good handle on what you want your wildlife habitat to become, put your plan on paper. Make sure you allow space for the plants to grow to their average size. It will look sparse at first, but in just a year or two it will fill out and you will be glad you didn't cram everything in.

Note: If you are unsure of your choices, your CVAS Ambassador can help direct you. If you are feeling overwhelmed or are having trouble choosing your plants, consider hiring a landscape designer who specializes in native plants.

IMPLEMENTING YOUR PLAN

PREPARING YOUR SPACE

Kill any existing lawn.

There are several options out there for this. It is a time-consuming process so you will need to allow an adequate time period to complete this part of your restoration.

Non-chemical:

Mulching:

This is a time-consuming process and isn't always foolproof. Seeds can re-germinate if the process is rushed. Cover your lawn with a layer of overlapping cardboard (or 6 layers of newspaper), add about 5 inches of mulch. Water regularly. In about 8-10 weeks, you'll be ready to plant.

Solarization: Cover your lawn in black plastic sheets that are weighed down with bricks or rocks. *Note: There are some grasses that may require more aggressive treatment.*

Chemical:

Spray a commercial product using glyphosate acid, such as Round-Up, on the lawn. Read the product's instructions for information on how long to wait before planting.

There are some grasses that may require more than one application.

Please note that the homemade recipes of vinegar, soap and salt can sterilize the soil.

It is advisable to wear protective gear when applying any chemicals.

BUYING YOUR PLANTS

Once the space is ready and the hardscape portion of your project has been completed, it's time to buy your plants. Don't do this too early. You want to be sure the plants aren't sitting around in their pots too long prior to being planted. Your plants will do far better with daily nursery care as opposed to risking neglect. It's easy to forget to water before it's too late!

Step One: Place all water features, benches, boulders, etc. into the desired location prior to planting.

Step Two: At least a day before planting, place your plants in their pots in the planting locations on your plan. Stand back and take a good look. Do they still work in the location you planned?

Step Three: Water those spots thoroughly and lightly water the potted plants (if necessary) to keep them moist.

PLANTING DAY

1. Dig a hole no deeper than the pot. Place the whole potted plant (in its container) into the hole. You should be able to fit the whole plant into the hole. The soil inside the pot and the soil outside the pot should either line up, or the soil inside should be just slightly higher.
2. Take the potted plant out of the hole, then fill the hole with water. When the water has totally drained (it might take a while), carefully remove the plastic pot from around the plant. Disturb the root ball as little as possible. *Don't rake out the roots.*
3. Put the plant in the hole. *Do not add amendments or fertilizers.* Native soils generally don't have them.
4. Backfill with the native soil and water your plant. One way to avoid breaking the new plants when dragging a hose through the newly planted area is to use one gallon milk or water jugs. Poke a hole in the bottom of the jug and fill with water. This will create a slow drip!

Many people advise making a trough around the plants. We do not advise this because we want the top of the root ball parallel to the ground. Why? Because plants breathe through the leaves during the day and through the top of the root ball at night. Making a basin around the plant creates loose soil thus inviting that soil to cover the root ball which can actually suffocate the plant.

MAINTAINING YOUR WILDLIFE HABITAT

ADDING MULCH

NOTE: Please check with your local officials and your insurance company for mulching policies and guidelines.

After you've put all the plants into the ground and watered them, you will want to add mulch. It will create a habitat for worms and bugs which is GOOD FOR THE BIRDS and more -- it creates living soil. It can also help to keep the weeds in check and allows the soil to hold in the moisture.

There are many options when it comes to mulch. The most cost-effective way to mulch will likely be shredded green waste. This is often available through city programs and is likely the least expensive. Arborist trimmings (if you can get them) are also typically less expensive, but they may be green and hot. You can also buy in bulk, which is less expensive than what you buy in bags at the store; these which can cost 10X the amount of what you can buy in bulk! All organic material will rot, but coarse material takes a longer time to break down.

A few more notes about mulch:

- *Both redwood and cedar repel insects – NOT the most ideal choice for a bird-friendly garden as neither fosters an ideal ecosystem with beneficial insects. These mulches can actually repel pollinators!*
- *Be sure to pull your mulch back from the root ball of the plant.*
- *Also, your mulch should not touch the leaves of the plant.*
- *As your plants mature and grow larger, they will create their own allelopathy. Their own leaf droppings will become the habitat for the soil so you will not need to mulch under your plants.*
- *oak leaves are ideal if you have them on your property*
- *Although more durable, both REDWOOD AND CEDAR CAN REPEL INSECTS. THESE MULCHES ARE NOT A GOOD CHOICE FOR A BIRD-FRIENDLY GARDEN as neither foster an ideal ecosystem with beneficial insects. Redwood and cedar can actually repel pollinators.*
- *Shredded bark (such as gorilla hair shredded mulch) is an excellent weed suppressant that stays on slopes BUT shredded bark is much more flammable.*
- *In mulched areas receiving an overabundance of water, fungus and mold can quickly become a problem.*

WATERING

THE FIRST YEAR:

Because your new plants are coming from nurseries, they have likely been watered daily or every two days. You will need to wean them off of that schedule as soon as possible.

Learn to read your plants – especially as the weather warms. Check frequently to assess the leaves. Are they holding up as they should? Are they losing their sheen? Are they beginning to droop? If so, they will need water.

As your plants become more established (during their first year), they should be checked once a week to see if they need water.

Slow, deep watering will encourage your natives to put their roots further down into the ground. Do not water against (aka blast with a hose) the crown (the main stem of the plant at the soil surface). Water should fall in the area of the dripline of the plant and beyond. Think slow and steady!

Please note: Watering plants that are not adapted to receiving water when it's hot can create a fungal problem.

WATERING

SUBSEQUENT YEARS:

The second and succeeding years: *water, if needed.*

PRUNING

As your plants grow and mature, they may need pruning. When pruning is needed, ALWAYS be hyperconscious of nesting activity. Be conscious of birds nesting in trees, shrubs and grassy areas. Pruning outside of nesting season is the best way to avoid disturbing the entire nesting process. September 15th to December 1st is your safest bet, but you should ALWAYS check to be sure there is no activity as some birds do nest year-round. Owls and hummingbirds are some of our early nesters.

Now, sit back, relax, and watch your habitat begin to flourish!

You have built it, THEY WILL COME!

SUGGESTED READING & VIDEOS

Nature's Best Hope by Douglas Tallamy

This is also available on video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPP3fe74mpM>

Also, *Homegrown National Park* is a great video! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97HKxVR5Ey8>