

ON THE WILD SIDE

Water—not just for flowers

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When my husband died, Social Security sent me \$250, originally designed to cover funeral expenses. I used it to buy a small recycling fountain for my garden that imitates a very small waterfall with three connected descending pools of water. It has been gurgling away in my backyard every summer for years and it is a delight to watch the “wild animals” in my yard enjoy

it. Chipmunks sneak up to take a sip of water, and many birds, especially the American Robins, *Turdus migratorius*, get right into the pool and splash with abandon.

Providing a water source is one of the requirements to register your yard as a National Wildlife Federation (NWF) Certified Wildlife Habitat. Birds need water for drinking, and to help them with their grooming. Feathers provide insulation, help give birds an aerodynamic shape for flying, and act as a raincoat to keep their skin dry.

If you are lucky enough to have a pond, stream or marsh on or at the edge of your property you are all set. This includes a lot of folks in Norton, as about 53 percent of Norton is classified as wetlands. Some of us, however, have to create a water source on our property. This can be as easy as purchasing a birdbath, or as complex as installing a small pond.

My good friend Kathy bought a solar birdbath and fountain for a sunny part of her yard, and enjoys watching the birds take a shower while they bathe. A visit to an outdoor supply store or a quick web or catalog search will give you lots of choices from very simple to very elaborate. Or you can be creative and use a large bowl or the top of a trashcan.



PHOTO BY CHARLENE McNEIL

A baby American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) enjoys a birdbath

Birdbaths provide safe water for birds if they are maintained and cleaned frequently. This may mean two to three times a week to prevent mosquito larvae from hatching. Cleaning also eliminates algae growth – that green scummy stuff that accumulates on the bottom of the birdbath and makes it hard to clean. The National Audubon Society recommends using a brush and a solution of nine parts water and one part bleach or vinegar. When the weather turns cold, a simple device can be purchased to keep the water warm enough that it doesn't freeze. If you are handy you can make one of your own. See www.birdwatchersdigest.com.

More adventurous folks may want to create a rain garden or a storm water marsh. Directions may be found at the NWF site <http://www.nwf.org>. Once your marsh is filled with plants, birds, dragonflies and butterflies will flock to the area. You may see butterflies “puddling” as they take in important salts and minerals missing in their nectar diet.

Amphibians such as toads, frogs and salamanders need water in order to survive and reproduce. You may have come across egg masses in a spring pond – a sure sign that they are reproducing in the area.

Surprisingly there is no real scientific difference between frogs and toads, but locally the wet slimy variety is called a frog and the dry bumpy variety is called a toad.

Amphibians have an important role in the food web. Frogs are carnivorous as adults and many have long sticky tongues that make them top notch insect trappers. Salamanders do their hunting among the moist leaves on the forest floor and engulf large numbers of mosquitoes, spiders and even worms. A healthy amphibian population is a signal to us that the environment is in good condition.

One way to attract amphibians to your garden is to build a pond. Another smaller investment is to buy or make a “toad abode.” If you want to make one, take a small clay pot and make a “doorway” in it by removing a piece of the clay from the rim of the pot. Turn it upside down in a damp shady part of your yard and surround it with



PHOTO BY CHARLENE McNEIL

A Black Swallowtail butterfly (*Papilio polyxenes*) alights on a butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidi*).

a bit of mulch. Sooner or later you will have a resident toad. For more elaborate directions see <http://www.craftygardener.ca/garden15.html>.

Our project, the Wild Backyards of Norton, is sponsored by the Land Preservation Society. Please join us by certifying your own wild backyard. For complete information, go to the National Wildlife Federation website: <http://www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx>. For local information, see the Land Preservation Society of Norton website: <http://www.nortonlandpreservation.org/>.

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