

## ON THE WILD SIDE

# A feast for the eyes

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Strawberry shortcake and blueberry pie: two great New England desserts we enjoy around the Fourth of July got me thinking about the native berries that grow nearby. Then I began to think about how important berries are to wildlife in our backyard.

We think of these berries as a real treat, but berries of many kinds are an important seasonal part of the diet of animals that visit on a regular basis.

Planting native bushes and trees that bear berries is a great way to attract and nurture a variety of native animals, from insects to small mammals like foxes, squirrels and raccoons.

There are many berry-bearing trees and shrubs native to Massachusetts. Before the berries develop, the flowers of these plants produce sweet nectar for those animals with adaptations to reach in and get it like hummingbirds, butterflies and moths. Other trees produce nuts, seeds, larger fruits, or sap that is enjoyed by a variety of birds and insects. Beech and birch trees, cherry, crabapple, elderberry, holly, juniper, mountain ash, oak, pine... I could go on but it is easy to see that you may already have these in your yard. The products of these plants are appreciated not only by birds but also by diverse insects who may also eat the leaves, buds and small branches, bark, etc.

All of these plants capture sunlight and turn it into useful energy-rich food (nectar, pollen, delectable berries, seeds,) eaten by birds, bats and other small mammals forming an important part of the food web. These animals, called consumers, are then eaten by predators e.g., spiders, ladybugs, dragonflies, salamanders, owls, or hawks. Neighbors in Norton have occasionally seen fox, coyote, fisher cats, hawks and perhaps the grandest predator of all (in the spirit of Independence Day) the American Bald Eagle!



PHOTO BY CHARLENE A. McNEIL

American Goldfinches can be attracted to your backyard with the addition of a bird feeder.

Colorful flowers also attract insects and help support the food chain. According to the Audubon Society, vines, grasses and flowers that attract birds include Virginia creeper, Trumpet vine, Purple coneflower, and New England aster. For a complete list, see their website: <http://www.massaudubon.org/> and click on Living with Wildlife.

I have to admit that milkweed has become one of my favorite flowering plants. It is gawky and rather strange but it gives us lots of surprises. It has a lovely fragrance that wafts into the house on breezy summer days. It attracts honeybees, bumble bees, butterflies and hummingbirds. I could go on, but I will save this story for another column – it is just fascinating.

By now, you can see that there are many sources of food already present in your yard making it a snap to meet the “Food” requirement – you only need to check off three boxes in this part of the application if you want to have your yard certified as a wildlife habitat with the National Wildlife Federation.

Natural food sources probably abound in all yards in Norton, but you may want to put out supplemental feeders to help complete the nutrition for some birds and to encourage them to put on a lively show that you will enjoy year round. I never knew we had American Goldfinches in our yard until friends, Linda and Fred, gave us a finch feeder many years ago. Now we see and hear these lively sweet singers year round – on the edge of the forest where they had been hiding all along. Likewise, the nuts and seeds we have in another feeder teases out chickadees, cardinals, nuthatches, wrens, woodpeckers, finches most of the year and even more varieties in the winter. Our hummingbird feeders are busy all summer long and the suet feeder we put out in the winter is also very popular with our visitors.

Our project, The Wild Backyards of Norton, is sponsored by the Land Preservation Society (LPS) of Norton. We hope to have 150 households in Norton certified as wildlife habitats with the ultimate goal of having Norton recognized as a Community Wildlife Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation. 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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