

“NATURESCAPING” BASICS

What is Naturescaping? One definition: “Creating complex habitats — using primarily native plants — that are satisfying to both humans and wildlife.” Let’s look at each of these three components: complexity, native plants, and satisfying.

Why “complex” habitats, and what does “complex” mean?

Remember the phrase “complexity begets diversity.” In “naturescaping,” complexity generally refers to:

- (1) planting a variety of species
- (2) planting for different heights, or “layers”
- (3) planting to have cover and food in all seasons
- (4) developing different terrain (creating low spots, brush piles, thickets, snags, downed wood, etc.)

Planting a variety of species will ensure diversity of habitat, food, and cover. Different species are adapted to different plants.

“Layering,” or planting with a canopy, middle and understory layer of vegetation, provides lots of different options for birds, small mammals, butterflies and bees, and amphibians. You’ll attract the greatest variety of wildlife to your yard if you provide different habitats. In addition to the wildlife benefits in your own yard, you’ll be helping salmon and other aquatic animals further downstream: when you plant in layers, you help intercept stormwater, prevent the problems of flooding, and help recharge the groundwater so we have it during dry times (such as when salmon return in early fall).

Planting for cover and food in all seasons is generally easy if you’re doing steps 1 and 2. Make sure you have a healthy mix of both evergreen and deciduous plants. Think about the kinds of fruit and seeds they produce — will they persist into winter to provide food? Do some bloom in winter or very early spring to provide food to returning migrants? Also make sure the plants you choose have different types of flowers in terms of shape and color — some animals might be attracted to red tubular flowers, others might prefer yellow discs. Do your plants attract beneficial insects or other insects that are food sources for birds? If you want butterflies, do you have **both** a food source for the caterpillar **and** nectar for the butterfly? Research the food preferences of the animals you want to see in your yard.

Developing different terrain in your landscape also helps attract various species and provides even more diverse habitat. Try to re-create some of the features you find in a natural forest: notice how the forest’s ground isn’t even, and how dead trees provide homes to all sorts of little animals, fungi, and plants. When you’re developing your landscape, create little depressions like you see in the woods and add large rocks and rock piles. “Three-dimensional terrain” provides micro-climates to give animals a broader range of climates from which to choose. Depressions and small basins are also important to provide water to animals; if you can’t have a natural depression or pond, place bird baths in key locations. When wooded areas are being cleared in your area, ask the owner for permission to transfer fallen logs or small stumps to your property. When you need to clear a tree from your property, consider cutting it off up high to create a snag for woodpeckers and other animals. Brush piles and thickets make great hiding and feeding places for all sorts of wildlife.

Why “primarily native plants”? What are the advantages?

Native plants have grown alongside native wildlife, insects, fungi, soil bacteria, and diseases for eons. They have developed a web of complex inter-relationships with these other organisms. These associations mean that native animals will generally be more attracted to native flora, which means that you’ll attract a wider variety of animals and beneficial insects to your yard.

Furthermore, native plants often repel or survive harmful native organisms or diseases, so you won’t have to use chemical treatments to maintain healthy plants. Because they’re adapted to our region’s climate and soil conditions, when planted appropriately native plants will require less maintenance and soil amending, and won’t require extra water once they’re established (generally after the second summer).

(continued on reverse)

Native plants won't "take over" an area and create a monoculture, as some non-natives will (such as Scot's broom, English ivy, or Japanese knotweed). Although animals find value in non-native plants, with a monoculture landscape you won't see much variety (and may only attract non-native animals, such as European Starlings, as well!). Native plants won't "strangle" other plants in your landscape the way invasive non-natives such as field bindweed ("morning glory") or English ivy will.

Finally, the plants that are native to your area define the natural heritage and are the best expression of its natural beauty. Here in the Pacific Northwest, our evergreen trees, mossy big-leaf maples, and multitude of understory plants with a variety of flower colors and bright berries are a beautiful aesthetic worth re-creating and preserving in our home landscapes.

Many people find that learning more about native plants helps them deepen their appreciation. Refer to our handout, "Top Picks for Native Plant Landscapes in Thurston County" to get you started. We also have two helpful books available, "Grow Your Own Native Landscape" and "Winter in the Woods." Both are available for free through the Timberland Regional Library system, or for purchase. Finally, we offer regular workshops on plant identification, propagation, and naturescaping throughout the year, and our public demonstration gardens can provide hands-on gardening ideas.

How do I know that my landscape is "satisfying" to wildlife? Can it be "satisfying" to me, too?

If you follow the basic steps outlined above, and research the food, nesting, and cover needs of the wildlife you hope to attract, you'll almost certainly create "satisfying" habitat! Even a small, urban yard can become a green island sanctuary for wildlife.

When you think about what's "satisfying" to you, start with some basics. How much lawn do you need? How much time do you have for maintenance? Do you and your family regularly play sports or have other activities requiring lawn at home, or do you go to public playfields and parks? Many families find they need only a little lawn (or even none at all!). Replacing lawn with diverse native plantings eliminates maintenance work of mowing and watering, and gives you more area to view wildlife. Dense plantings will crowd and shade out most weeds within just a year or two, giving you more time to enjoy your garden and the wildlife within it.

In addition to choosing plants for their wildlife value, make sure you choose plants that appeal to you. Most local native plants start blooming in February and usually are done blooming by late July. Then they develop colorful or interesting seedheads or fruits that often persist through winter, adding attraction (and wildlife food) throughout the colder months. By mixing non-native plants that are recommended for our area, you can have more bright flowers in your yard during the hot summer months (see our "Favorite Waterwise Wonders" handout). Try to choose plants that are drought-tolerant so they'll survive our dry summers without extra water and work.

What kinds of gardening activities appeal to you? If you don't have time for a lot of gardening, or would rather focus your gardening energies on vegetables, a mostly native landscape will be much more manageable once it's established than a large turf-covered lot. If you enjoy creating complicated perennial borders, you can still create layered wildlife habitat with both native and non-native trees and shrubs, and then mix native and non-native perennials, ferns and other herbaceous plants in colorful ground-level borders.

Above all, have fun!



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