

THE BACKYARD & BEYOND

No longer a backyard project, the National Wildlife Federation's Certified Wildlife Habitat program positions independent garden centers as the ultimate "one-stop shop" for consumers.

By Pete Mihalek

What can be better than neighborhood residents and local businesses recognizing your garden center as *the* leader in your community for anything and everything earth friendly?

That's a handsome title — one that begs the question: Do you deserve it?

With issues of water conservation and invasive exotic species emerging in all parts of the United States, "We can't afford to do things like we did in the past, when we really didn't pay attention to the impact our gardens had on the environment," says the National Wildlife Federation's (NWF) David Mizejewski. "Being a responsible member of the lawn and garden industry means that you need to pay more attention to this. This is a business trend of the future."

More Than a Garden

Promoting the NWF's Certified Wildlife Habitat is one obvious way independent garden centers can get a handle on earth stewardness and take the lead on it.

"Getting involved in growing the awareness of NWF and certifying a habitat can present plenty of opportunities for customer goodwill," Mizejewski says. "Americans have really embraced the idea of green living. Everyone is attuned to wanting to do the right thing."

So what exactly is a Certified Wildlife Habitat?

The four key (and required) habitat ingredients for certification are: food, water, cover/shelter, and a place to raise young, according to www.nwf.org.

"It's not a complicated process and it's not just for backyards," Mizejewski adds. "There's this common misconception that in order to certify a habitat, you have to wipe out

everything that's already there and start from scratch or spend a ton of money or put in an elaborate water garden."

The NWF naturalist says most of your customers already have some of the basics required for this program. The program is designed to get as many people in the door and engaged, so the bar for certification isn't too high to keep shoppers from participating.

"We've learned that once people realize they're already doing some of the basics and then start to see wildlife show up because of their efforts, they then get incredibly engaged," he says.

Plants in Your Own Backyard

To get the ball rolling at your garden center, Mizejewski believes the key to the success is for the garden center to also create a habitat in some capacity and then get it certified.

"Walk the talk," he says. "Even if the garden center doesn't certify the entire facility, it can build a demo garden to attract butterflies — what a great way to sell your product and show that you've made an effort."

Touting the advantages of native plants can act as another vehicle garden centers can use to reinforce the benefits of habitat building, says Steve Castorani, owner of North Creek Nurseries and American Beauties Native Plants.

A huge proponent of native plants is the National Wildlife Federation, but after heavily promoting native plants to help build wildlife habitats, NWF struggled in the past to find a common place to send their members who were looking for plants native to their region.

Bringing native plants under one heading with branding, informative tags and a website (www.abnativeplants.com), Castorani and American Beauties helped fill that void for NWF.

Partners in Flight

Due to urban sprawl and landscape degradation, songbird populations are in great decline. Last summer, ornithologists at The Scotts Company surveyed 47 songbirds and according to data, 25 of those 47 species have declined in the past 43 years. Some of the declining populations include the Purple Finch (45 percent decline), Blue Jay (26 percent), the Song Sparrow (23 percent) and the House Sparrow (80 percent).

In an effort to drum up public awareness on this downward trend, the National Wildlife Federation and The Scotts Company have teamed up through the Save The Songbirds program, with a goal to save one million songbirds by encouraging consumers to pledge to create 50,000 acres of new songbird habitats nationwide.

For every specially marked bag of Scotts Songbird Selections NutriThrive seed, \$1 is donated to NWF in support of songbird habitats. For additional information, visit www.savethesongbirds.com.



Consider this example from the Save The Songbirds supplemental material The Scotts Co. provides. Offering a checklist is not only helpful for a project like building a Certified Wildlife Habitat, it also reinforces your store is the ultimate resource to get the project done.

The Scotts Co.

Getting Certified

Think your customers might be interested in creating a Certified Wildlife Habitat? Here are a few things they should know:

1. The habitat doesn't have to start from scratch or be elaborate.
2. Become a member of the National Wildlife Federation and use its website (www.nwf.org) as a resource throughout this process.
3. In building a Certified Wildlife Habitat there are

four requirements. The habitat must provide a food source (ex: native plants, seeds, nectar), water source (ex: birdbath, water garden), cover/shelter (ex: thicket, birdhouse) and a place to raise young (ex: dense shrubs, vegetation).

4. Your garden center is the ultimate one-stop shop to provide the tools and key ingredients to see this project through.
5. Apply for certification (www.nwf.org).



"It was kind of like a hand in glove arrangement," he says. American Beauties Native Plants currently distributes a portion of the purchase price back to NWF to help in that organization's growth.

Native plants are vital in wildlife habitats, Castorani explains. The reduction of native plants reduces the number of host plants the insects need, especially butterflies, to lay their eggs, which directly affects the bird population.

In the spring, the critical source of food for the birds is the larvae, which is a very important link that help's populate the species and people don't often understand that.

"As national populations of native plants have declined, there's been a direct correlation, which has been well documented, with the decline of bird species populations," he adds.

Castorani through American Beauties has been working with NWF the last couple of years to implement a habitat ambassador program, which will marry a garden center with a local NWF volunteer. As a habitat ambassador, that volunteer will visit the garden center to talk about building habitats and the importance of ecology. Garden centers can then create events and promotions around this, educating customers on the project of creating a Certified Wildlife Habitat.

"There's a part of every garden center's customer base that's looking for a project like this," Castorani says. "They're looking for information like this, because they truly care about the earth. There's a rise in popularity for natural, lower maintenance gardening. Gardens that solve problems.

"Each garden center staff, there's already an employee that's a birder, a perennial gardener or native plant enthusiast. There is someone on your staff that will embrace this program and get behind it and once you have an employee who's embraced the program, then its becomes really easy to sell the products necessary to it." **LGR**

An advertisement for Mad Mats by Mariachi. The background is a dark blue fabric with a repeating pattern of green and yellow circular motifs. The text "Mad Mats" is written in a large, yellow, cursive font. Below it, "by Mariachi" is written in a smaller, yellow, serif font. Further down, "LEAN, GREEN, SELLING MACHINE" is written in a yellow, bold, sans-serif font. At the bottom, there is a block of text in yellow: "Fabulous new designs plus the same KILLER QUALITY in ALL recycled plastic". Below that, the contact information "800-871-7495 or info@madmats.com" and "fx 215-629-9890" is listed in yellow.