The Humane Gardener: Nurturing Habitat for Wildlife

Part 1: The American Dream Home: A Nightmare for Animals
Traditional cultivation practices can have devastating impacts on wildlife. Toads, turtles, rabbits and other small creatures fall victim to mower blades. Some invasive and nonnative plants are toxic to mammals, birds, and insects who haven’t co-evolved with those plants.

Much conventional gardening wisdom is based on marketing ploys of pesticide and nuisance wildlife control companies. We learn to view life-sustaining plants as “weeds” and natural materials as “messy.” Holes in leaves are seen as “damage” in the garden rather than as nourishment for wild species, feeding into a cultural framework that casts plant eaters as “pests” and “nuisances.”

Part 2: How to Create a Real Dream Home for All Species
By questioning these marketing ploys and our own assumptions, we can make our landscapes more hospitable to the life around us through the following steps:

Nurture nature’s gifts: Rather than bending the land to our will, we can look to the land to lead the way, nurturing the gifts that nature brings in on her own—the volunteer natives that provide a refuge for wildlife. This helps not just the butterflies and birds but also grazing mammals and others trying to making a living in our outdoor spaces.

Plant and cultivate with care: Going native for wildlife doesn’t have to mean ripping everything out at once—and that’s often ineffective anyway. Take it one step at a time by reducing the presence of lawns and nonnatives gradually, being mindful of who might already be living in the existing landscape. Focus on multiple seasons of bloom to nourish early- and late-season pollinators, and don’t forget trees and shrubs in your planting scheme. Use vigorous natives to outcompete invasives.

Protect wild nurseries: None of our 4,000 native bee species nest in hives, and few of our baby bird species eat seeds. Yet these and other myths about wild families persist. Create spaces for them instead by leaving bare patches of soil for ground-nesting bees, stalks for birds and cavity-nesting bees, logs and leaves for insects, amphibians and reptiles, and tree snags for birds, raccoons, and other animals raising their young.

Create a no-hazard zone: Home landscapes are filled with unintentional hazards for wildlife—garden netting, artificial lighting at night, and unmonitored pets, to name a few. Poorly timed tree trimming also endangers animals, orphaning many thousands of birds and squirrels across the country each year. And while trapping and relocating animals is often thought of as humane, it can lead to much suffering, separating mothers from young and dooming relocated animals to becoming easy prey in unfamiliar territory.

Resolve conflicts humanely: Think from animals’ perspectives, and you will have much more success in coexisting with them. Understand that many are our natural allies for gardeners; moles create habitat, skunks eat beetle larvae, coyotes eat mice and other small mammals. Rather than resisting wildlife’s plant nibbling, prepare for it by adding extra plants and using creative deterrents already on hand.

Resources
HumaneGardener.com: Articles on the site (http://www.humanegardener.com) explore all of these issues in further depth, and profiles provide inspiration and information about humane gardening in diverse regions of the country. A sampling of available articles relevant to the presentation include:

- “How to Fight Plants with Plants: Using vigorous natives to outcompete natives”:
  http://www.humanegardener.com/how-to-fight-plants-with-plants/
• “Flower Power: A Q&A about straight species with Annie White”:
  http://www.humanegardener.com/flower-power-a-qa-with-annie-white/
• “How to Really Save the Bees”: http://www.humanegardener.com/how-to-really-save-the-bees/
• “Strangers in a Strange Land: The dangers of trapping and relocating”:

Under the tab “Plant Resources,” you can also find national databases that allow you to search for zip code for lists of native plants in your region that match local conditions:
http://www.humanegardener.com/native-plant-sources/

http://www.humanesociety.org/wildneighbors (You can also access free PDFs of a wonderful but out-of-print book called Wild Neighbors here:
http://animalstudiesrepository.org/humspre/1/)

Local Resources
The Native Plant Society of New Jersey: http://www.npsnj.org/
New Jersey Association of Wildlife Rehabilitators: https://njawr.com/

Recommended books
The Humane Gardener by Nancy Lawson
Wild Neighbors by John Hadidian
Bringing Nature Home by Doug Tallamy
Garden Revolution by Larry Weaner and Thomas Christopher
Bees: An Identification and Native Plant Forage Guide by Heather Holm
Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer
The Living Landscape by Rick Darke and Doug Tallamy
The Forest Unseen and The Songs of Trees by David George Haskell
Coyote America by Dan Flores
The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating by Elisabeth Tova Bailey
Planting in a Post-Wild World by Claudia West and Thomas Rainer
A New Garden Ethic by Benjamin Vogt
Attracting Native Pollinators Farming with Native Beneficial Insects by Xerces Society