



A Tale of Two Yards

Gardening for Bees in Central Ontario & Cape Breton, Nova Scotia

By Maggie Black

My foray into gardening for bees and other local wildlife began in 2017, when I attended a “gardening for wildlife” workshop at a native plant nursery in Central Ontario, Canada. I came home armed with inspiration, some basic knowledge, and a number of native plants. I drew up a plan for converting my relatively barren yard into a pollinator and wildlife oasis, sought feedback from the owner of the plant nursery, and started digging. I was hooked!

My subdivision was located on rolling former cattle farming land: mostly barren and rocky, with sandy, nutrient-poor soils, and hot and dry in the summer. I began by planting a spruce tree, an apple tree, twelve shrubs, and native perennial, wildflower, vegetable, and berry gardens in the flat areas of the yard. Then, I set my sights on the hill behind the house, digging trenches crosswise, installing native plants in the trenches, and periodically trimming the grass between the rows during the growing season. I added several wildlife- and pollinator-friendly features, including high, low, and flowing water, a mudding pond for butterflies, rotting logs, stone piles, bee, bat, bird, and toad houses, and bird feeders in the appropriate seasons. I built it, and they came! After five years, all manner of bees, butterflies, bugs, birds, rabbits, frogs, toads, and a really big garter snake, nicknamed “Ella,” inhabited my yard!



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In 2023, I moved from Central Ontario to a city on Cape Breton Island, in Nova Scotia. Here, where it rains more frequently, the climate is moderated by the ocean, the soil is richer, and my yard is lush and green. A row of mature native conifers inhabit the back of the property, non-native trees and shrubs dot other parts of the yard, and two sides of my property are bordered by brush. The thicket beyond my yard is beautiful and provides privacy, but includes invasive plants. Over the years, goutweed has spread from the brush area throughout my back and side lawn. I joined an online goutweed forum, to learn how to manage this potential garden menace without the use of herbicides, and attended a gardening workshop at my local library to learn about native plant gardening in Atlantic Canada. The previous owners of my home had not established any gardens, so I was starting from scratch again. In 2024, I drew up a site plan and planted seven little native trees, native perennial/lupine, and created a rain garden, a mixed wildflower garden, and vegetable and berry frames. I also added many of the wildlife- and pollinator-friendly water, food, and shelter features I had in my old yard. In 2025, I built a native wildflower border and another vegetable frame. In 2026, I will add two more native perennial gardens and double the size of the rain garden.



During the first two years in Cape Breton, three species of bumble bee, honey bees, moths, squirrels, multiple bird species, nesting chickadees and tree swallows, and the occasional deer, fox, and raccoon, have been observed in my yard. I'm hoping significant numbers of butterflies will make an appearance. However, since I am the only one on my street with gardens, it may take a while for butterflies to find my offerings.

Creating pollinator and wildlife oases from scratch, in two very different settings, has been both creative and rewarding. Providing for the needs of local creatures, and having them utilize those provisions, is wonderful; living among trees and flowering native plants is good for the soul.

For more information see the gardening web pages at: <http://www.blackdeer.ca>

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