

April 25, 2025

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## Happy Arbor Day! Celebrate by planting native trees and shrubs for wildlife!



In 2025, the Wildlife Diversity Program is releasing a series of articles throughout the year on how to support wildlife where you live. We will focus on five areas where humans and wildlife can connect. They all represent positive actions that can be taken to make your little corner of the world a little more welcoming to wildlife. This month we are celebrating Arbor Day (April 25) by highlighting how you can plant native plants for wildlife by planting native trees and shrubs.

One of the best features of my yard is the large hackberry tree that stands behind my house and provides shade from summer heat, beautiful yellow leaves in the fall, fruits for birds throughout the year, and entertainment year-round from watching the squirrels and woodpeckers amble about its branches. We can all think of a tree that is special to us; whether it is a tree in your own yard or at a local park. Trees and shrubs in urban spaces not only provide a nice aesthetic, they also help to reduce air pollution and cool areas during summer heat. But aside from the benefits trees and shrubs provide to people, they provide numerous benefits to wildlife.



*Chipping Sparrow feeding young in a nest in an oak tree. ©2010 Jenni Dyar*

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Native trees and shrubs help to provide shelter for wildlife species, especially in urban spaces where other forms of shelter may be lacking. During winter, shrubs and evergreen trees provide shelter from overhead predators, harsh winds, and deep snow to many species of songbirds, rabbits and squirrels. During summer, shrubs and trees provide shelter from intense sunlight and harsh storms. Larger trees with a hollow portion help to provide dens for many species of wildlife including squirrels, raccoons, and Virginia opossums. Many birds construct their nests in the branches of trees and shrubs, often using sticks and leaves in their construction while others such as woodpeckers and Wood Ducks will nest in tree cavities.

Native trees and shrubs are particularly important for wildlife as they can support hundreds of species of native insects which also provide a source of food for many birds. The flowers of many native trees and shrubs are an important source of nectar for a wide range of pollinating insects. Trees such as oaks, walnuts, and hickories provide an important source of acorns and nuts that wildlife such as Blue Jays, squirrels, and chipmunks store for use during winter. On the other hand, non-native trees and shrubs that are often planted in yards and urban areas do not provide the food or habitat resources to which native wildlife are adapted. Many native wildlife species do not, or cannot, utilize non-native trees and shrubs.



There are many beneficial native trees and shrubs that you can plant on your property but a few include white oak, red oak, hackberry, black walnut, American basswood, white pine, shagbark hickory, silver maple, American plum, elderberry, ninebark, red-osier dogwood, and American hazelnut. Rather than planting just a few species, planting a diversity of trees and shrubs on your property helps to support more species of wildlife throughout the year. It can be helpful to choose species that bloom during different parts of the growing season as they provide essential nectar resources to pollinators throughout the year. Likewise, choosing species that produce different food resources such as different sizes of acorns, nuts, and berries during different times of the year can help provide food for a variety of wildlife year-round. Selecting a variety of tree and shrub species also helps to add more diverse structure to your yard, with different heights and types of foliage that cater to various wildlife species.

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White oak leaves, photo by Bruce Ehresman.

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If you are interested in planting native trees and shrubs on your property, check out the [State Forest Nursery website](#) to find native seedlings. For more information on the types of trees and shrubs that may be suited to your property check out the [DNR's list of native trees and shrubs](#) and the [Iowa Living Roadway Trust Fund's Native Plants Database](#) which also provides the dates different species bloom. For more information on identifying native tree species and their specific benefits to wildlife, see the [Iowa DOT's Guide to Common Trees and Shrubs of Iowa](#). To find out more about planting and managing trees and shrubs on your property reach out to your [local Iowa DNR District Forester](#).