

A close-up photograph of a bird, possibly a sparrow, splashing water in a birdbath. The bird is captured in mid-splash, with its wings spread and water droplets flying everywhere. The background is dark, making the water droplets stand out. The overall mood is dynamic and natural.

Animal- attracting gardens

Creating a wildlife haven in your backyard may be easier than you think.
by Samille Mitchell

In a suburban backyard several birds are swooping into the bird bath sending water from their wings in a spray of silvery droplets. Nearby, a butterfly lands on its food-plant, a lizard scurries through the leaf litter and a frog hops from a rock into a shrub-lined pond. It's an idyllic scene. And it's one that can be achieved in most backyards.

While most of us are aware of the benefits of planting native plants in reducing water use, what of the myriad of other joys that native plants bring to our backyards?

Local plants

Native plants not only require less water than their exotic counterparts but also reduce the need for pesticides and herbicides, not to mention eliminating lawn-mowing, which burns fossil-fuels. They also generally require less pruning, which helps reduce green waste going to landfill. However, not all natives are equal. Plants that



grow naturally within Australia can be termed native, but they may not be native to your particular area. For the best environmental benefit, you'll need to plant plants that are native, or local, to your particular area.

This can be tricky if you live deep in the suburbs where the local plants have long gone. Look for any pockets of bushland and try to replicate the plant types. Otherwise you could contact your local council to ask about the nearest bushland with your soil style and request a plant list. Councils may also be able to point you in the

direction of a local 'friends' group that could help. Alternatively, contact Greening Australia for a list of species that occur in certain soil types.

Feathered friends

A backyard filled with birds does wonders for the human spirit. It is simply delightful to watch the antics of tiny honeyeaters bathing in a bird bath, take in the melody of magpies calling in the early mornings or perhaps watching willie-wagtails rear their young in a nest.

But even more important than the joys of watching birds is the fact that providing a habitat for birds in an ever-growing urban environment helps them to survive. Without backyard gardens, many bird species would be locally extinct.

In Perth, common native birds you may see in the backyard include the singing honeyeater, brown honeyeater, red wattlebird and Australian ringneck parrot (commonly called the twenty-eight). The red wattlebird is also quite common, and is recognisable from a small pink-red flap of skin, or wattle, behind the eye at the base of the bird's cheek. Australian magpies occur in relatively open gardens (see 'Birds in the garden', *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 2003-04).

Birds not only nurture the human spirit but are also important in pollinating many native plants. Insect-eating birds also help keep insects at bay. So how can you create a bird-attracting garden? Basically, you need to provide three elements—water, shelter and food.

Previous page

Main A brown honeyeater dives in and out of a bird bath.

Photo - Doug Coughran

Insets Motorbike frog (*Litoria moorei*).

Rainbow bee-eater.

Photos - Sallyanne Cousins

Lesser wanderer (*Danaus chrysippus*).

Photo - Daniella Van/Sallyanne Cousins

Photography

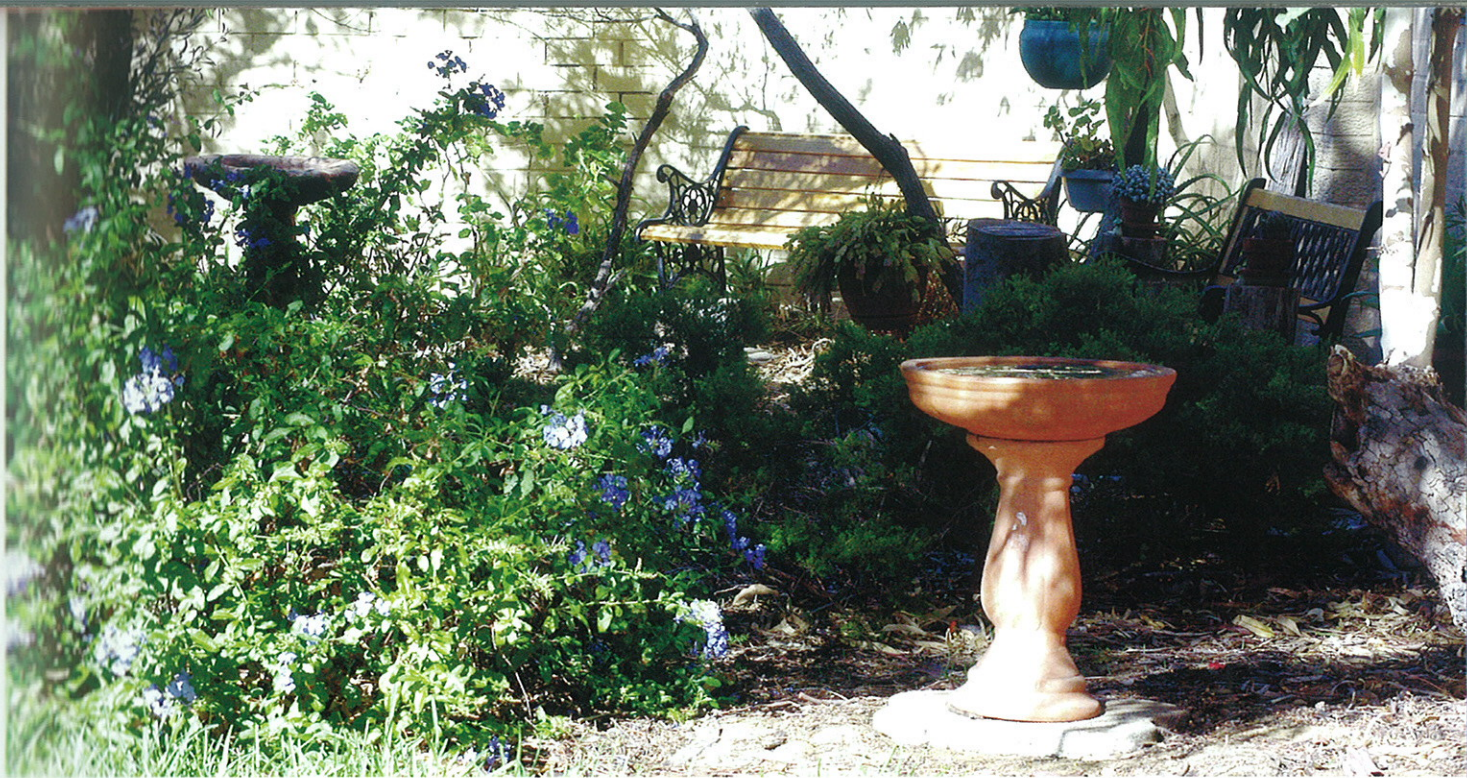
Top Flowering native garden.

Photo - Jiri Lochman

Left Native garden in full flower.

Photo - Sallyanne Cousins





Top Water sources such as bird-baths are important in attracting birds to gardens.
Photo - Doug Coughran

Above left A silvereye at a bird feeder.
Photo - Sallyanne Cousans

Above right A brown honeyeater feeding on the nectar of an Illyarrie (*Eucalyptus erythrocorys*).
Photo - Doug Coughran

Water is the easy part—a bird bath positioned near overhanging shrubs will attract birds, as will a pond (a pond may also attract frogs—see over page). Birds are most likely to use such a water source if the bath or pond has some overhanging vegetation to provide perches and an access or escape route.

You also need to create a variety of potential habitats or foraging areas, including some open areas, some with shrubs and some with trees, to provide shelter that will attract different types of birds.

Flowering plants such as grevilleas and banksias are good for attracting nectar-feeding birds. Also plant species that attract insects, like wattle or eucalypt species, as insects in turn attract insect-

eating birds and are beautiful and diverse in their own right.

It's also worthwhile leaving leaf litter to accumulate in some areas to attract insects and other invertebrates, as well as lizards, which will in turn attract birds who feed on them. Leaving leaf litter also has the added advantage of encouraging the growth of fungi species, which are vital to the ecology in recycling nutrients and in forming mutually beneficial associations with the roots of many plants (see 'Bushfires, fungi and biodiversity' on page 16).

You can also consider providing a feeding station to attract birds but be careful not to supply too much food or to offer it too regularly—birds may come to rely on the food source leaving them vulnerable if you go away. Also, what you feed may not match

the birds' natural diet, causing dietary imbalances.

You can attract nectar-feeding birds like honeyeaters and silvereyes with a feeder containing a diluted solution of honey. Use one teaspoon of honey to two tablespoons of water to match the concentration of nectar in bird-pollinated plants. Do not use sugar as it



contains only sucrose and none of the vitamins present in honey and nectar.

You may also like to consider providing nest boxes positioned high in a tree to encourage birds to nest in your garden. Be sure to keep the entrance reasonably small so as to prevent cats from entering.

Butterflies

Unfortunately, the most common butterflies you're likely to see in your backyard are introduced species like the cabbage white and yellow and orange palm darts. However, with some extra effort, you may be able to attract native species too (see 'Butterfly Gardens', *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 2004 and 'Butterflies of the south-west' on page 22).

To encourage a particular butterfly you need to plant nectar plants on which they can feed. Try species like Western Australian waitzias (*Waitzia* spp.), *Grevillea crithmifolia*, coastal banjine (*Pimelea ferruginea*), grasstrees (*Xanthorrhoea* spp.) and plants in the genera *Baeckea*, *Leptospermum*, *Melaleuca* and *Thryptomene*.



Top left Grevilleas attract various bird species like this yellow-throated miner.
Photo - Ann Storrie

Centre left Chequered swallowtail butterfly (*Papilio demoleus*).
Photo - Geoff Walker

Left Striated pardalote.
Photo - Doug Coughran



Top right Little eagle at a Padbury bird-bath.

Photo – Jason Coughran

Top A Major Mitchell cockatoo, likely to be an aviary escapee.

Above Grey butcherbird.

Photos – Doug Coughran

However, it's much more helpful to the butterflies if you provide plants on which they can breed. These are called the butterfly's food-plants. You may like to consult the Department of Environmental and Conservation Bush Book *Common Butterflies of the South-West* to work out what butterflies are attracted to what plants.

Good butterfly gardens should help larvae and pupae to survive. You

can encourage the breeding cycle by having food-plants scattered over the garden. When larvae pupate, they often seek hiding places among the foliage of low shrubs. So by making sure there are masses of dense low shrubs in the garden, or other nooks and crannies where the larvae and pupae can hide, more can survive and emerge as butterflies. Breeding butterflies benefit other animals too—the eggs, larvae and

pupae of butterflies are food for birds, lizards wasps and spiders.

Another tip in encouraging butterflies to your garden is to limit the use of insecticides and herbicides, both of which threaten butterfly larvae.

Frogs

Frogs not only delight with their fascinating form but also play an important role in pest control. What's



Birds in the home garden – a personal experience by Doug Coughran

Want to attract a diverse range of bird species to your garden and create your own micro ecosystem but you are not quite sure whether it's all worth it because you live in the suburbs? Who would think that you will attract much of a response apart from a few native honeyeaters and the trusty introduced doves? You would be surprised what is around—my garden in Padbury now attracts species like a little eagle, Major Mitchell cockatoo (no doubt an aviary escapee but nevertheless an unexpected visitor) white-tailed black-cockatoos, boobook owls and striated pardalotes to name a few.

So what is the secret to attracting such a diverse and unexpected bird diversity of more than 28 species that visit this Padbury garden? Ask any bush-survival expert the three basic elements for survival and the answer will promptly be shelter, food and water. Applying these three basic elements to your suburban garden can surprise you with the ensuing results. You will be amazed by what species will turn up over time. Most nature-loving gardeners have planted natives to save water and our nutrient-poor Perth soils support a flora-rich diversity that do attract nectar-feeding birds—that's the easy part.

Two of the three basic elements seem to be addressed but what mostly is lacking in most Perth gardens are purpose-placed watering points. We all know water is precious and water conservation is an essential component of our urban dwelling but a miscellany of bird-baths will complete the necessary third element.

The bird-baths should not be placed completely in the open but strategically within and alongside shrubbery to provide timid birds a sense of security by the shelter. Also, by providing several choices of watering points, you will overcome the stress of several species or individuals competing for a single water supply for preening and drinking.

Once several tiers of native flora have established, leaf litter builds, insects, reptiles, amphibians and song birds regularly use the garden, then the predatory birds will be attracted to your micro-ecosystem. They will amuse and amaze you and, who knows, may even de-stress your urban lifestyle.



Above Motorbike frog.
Photo – Sallyanne Cousans

Right Fence skink (*Cryptoblepharus plagiocephalus*).
Photo – Jiri Lochman



more, many frogs have declined across much of the world so anything you can do to provide a new environment will help the survival of these delightful creatures (see 'Frogs in the garden', *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 1993).

The slender tree frog (*Litoria adelaidensis*) and the motorbike frog (*Litoria moorei*) are the most common frog species found in suburban gardens, particularly in greenhouses and ferneries or areas with water, such as ponds.

Frogs' skin needs to be moist so oxygen can diffuse through the frog and be picked up by the blood circulating just underneath. If exposed too long to a dry atmosphere, water will evaporate from the body and the frog will dry out and ultimately die.

As such, it's important to provide a damp, shady and moist environment to attract frog species. The best way of doing this is to install a pond and, as frogs and dragonfly nymphs eat mosquitoes, a pond doesn't necessarily mean a mosquito problem.

You can create an inexpensive pond from black plastic and old tyres with

rocks and reeds around its edges to hide the construction materials. Place the pond in a part sunny, part shady area but not directly under trees. Make sure the pond has shallow edges and a flat base and is at least 50 centimetres deep in one spot.

Also add plants, small logs and rocks around and in the pond to provide more habitat and improve the 'look' of the pond, and add washed sand or gravel to the base. You may also like to include a circulating pump to make the water less appealing for mosquitoes and plant water lilies to help discourage algal blooms.

Because of their permeable skin, frogs are susceptible to pesticides and other chemicals in the garden, so keep chemical use to a minimum. However, as frogs eat most common garden

pests, your need for pesticides may be reduced anyway.

While you may be keen on having frogs in the backyard, do not introduce frogs to the garden from other areas—there's no telling what their effect will be on local species.



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- 53 Perth's river dolphins
New research is looking into the lifestyles of the bottlenose dolphins of the Swan and Canning rivers in Perth.

- 59 Living fossils at Lake Thetis
New infrastructure enhances the experience for visitors viewing stromatolites at Lake Thetis, near Cervantes.

Regulars

- 3 Contributors and Editor's letter

- 29 Bookmarks
Mawson's Huts: The Birthplace of Australia's Antarctic Heritage
Great Whales
Leaf and branch

- 30 Feature park
Walpole and Nornalup Inlets Marine Park

- 45 Endangered
Rare plant community on massive limestone ridges

- 62 Urban Antics
A sense of place...

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