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Creating wildflower garden can help with pest control

*By Christopher Harrod April 5, 2013 12:00 am*

Habitat for native wildlife is diminishing across Sonoma County with development and conversion of wild lands into subdivisions, farms and vineyards. As wild areas continue to be fragmented, populations of wildflowers shrink, contributing to the loss of our native plants, pollinators, insects and birds. In urban areas, people can play a role in reducing the impact of development by planting and sowing wildflower strips.

Planting wildflowers alongside crops has become a renewed interest as a pest control method among organic and conventional farmers by attracting beneficial wildlife. Predatory insects (insects that eat other insects) feed off the nectar and pollen provided by the wildflowers.

This helps control outbreaks of certain pests such as aphids. Many farmers have explained that after planting these wildflower strips, also called "hedgerows," they see a reduction in crop damage within the first few years. Hedgerows aren't only valuable to farmers but urban dwellers as well.

By planting a diversity of native wildflowers, you can have continuous blooms through spring and into fall. This provides a constant nectar and seed source for bees, birds and insects. Additionally, the seeds of these wildflowers can spread throughout the county to start other local native wildflower populations. Hedgerows can also provide shelter for birds and create over-wintering sites (locations for beneficial insects to take cover from our winter climate).

You might be wondering how to plant your own wildflower garden. There are more than a few ways to grow wildflowers at home. Two common methods used to start a wildflower garden are by container planting or by using seeds, my favorite method.

Although plants may be the same species, wildflowers from outside your area may have different genetics than your local population. When possible, use plants and seeds that are local varieties.

These are often better adapted to your area and less likely to contaminate the local gene pool. Furthermore, never dig up wild plants for your own garden. Transplanting wild plants is against the law on most public land.

When preparing an area to be planted, it is important to make sure the area is free of weeds. If possible, pull weeds and water the area; allow another round of weeds to emerge again, pull and repeat if necessary. This will help diminish the weed seed bank that lies in the soil and allow for better success and weed control in the long run.

Most California wildflowers are best seeded in the fall. If you can't wait for next fall, I have seen some people successfully sow seeds in winter and early spring.

By spring and summer, the flowers should be in full bloom. Certain wildflowers are sold in containers at nurseries, and those can generally be planted throughout the year.

Be mindful that some wildflowers do not flourish in pots and fare better by direct seeding (sown where they will permanently grow).

Planting native wildflowers has many benefits, including the enjoyment you'll receive from watching the new visitors in your garden.

Whether you're removing lawn or covering a bare spot in your yard, wildflowers are a great way to provide beauty while sustaining biodiversity, using less water and reducing pesticide use.

Helpful websites are California Native Plant Society (www.cnps.org) and

Xerces Society (www.xerces.org).

Christopher Harrod is an environmentalist, horticulturalist, novice mycologist and freelancer. An SSU alumni who promotes the stewardship of our environment, he has served as an intern and is now a volunteer with the Cotati Creek Critters. For more information, links, and to visit his blog, go to www.wildcjh.wordpress.com.

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