

One of the top worries we hear about at Habitat Network from people considering wildlife-friendly landscaping (or even just reducing the size of their manicured lawn) is a fear that it will look too messy. Like it or not, native and wildlife-friendly gardening has a reputation for not being tidy. We think, with a few little tricks, however, you can make even the *wildest* yard look tame enough to fit in on your block.



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When it comes to front yard landscapes neighborhood norms dominate people's preferences. Research has shown that more than anything else, preferences for landscapes are determined by a set of implicit rules about what yards *should* look like ☑. This is problematic when you want a landscape that not only appeals to your neighbors but also benefits wildlife. The solution? Including visible design cues of human intention in your wildlife-friendly landscape.



Mow the Edges. Meadows can be really beautiful, but in the context of a yard they can look unkempt, or even weedy. Mowing a thin strip along human paths, like streets and sidewalks, is a clear cue to onlookers that the property is actively managed and can transform “untidy” into elegant.

The grounds at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, NY are maintained this way, and it results in a lovely space, not only for wildlife—since most of the open areas are left to grow wild—but for visitors and staff who enjoy wandering the maintained pathways.





Space Plants Wisely. Sometimes we make planting errors that negatively affect the look of a space. One of these is when we plant our annuals too far apart. Sometimes this is because plants are expensive and the number needed to fill a space was underestimated, and other times the spacing instructions that came with the plant are misleading. In order to accurately space plants you need to take into account your USDA planting zone (Don't know it? Look it up on our [Local Resources Page](#)). In USDA Zones 2-5, annuals may need to be placed closer together by as much as a third to a half as close as the tags say. The northern growing season for annuals is five or six months, not the eight months that may be assumed on the planting tag. Space plants too far apart, like twelve inches for a salvia, and they won't fill out and start touching leaves until right around the first fall frost. (*note: Salvias are perennial in certain parts of the country, like California where there are at least 18 native species*).



On the other hand, perennials, like shrubs, are often spaced too closely together. As they grow to their full size they are crowded and look messy. Sometimes, they are pruned to within an inch of their lives when mature to keep from crowding out other landscaping (for more on this visit this [great article from Houzz](#)). It is important to take into account their full size when planting, even if it looks bare when they are first planted. Most perennials need to be spaced around eighteen inches apart; many larger perennials are best planted twenty-four or even thirty inches apart.



Massing and Drifting. Clustering plants, rather than just using one of everything, can really create a rhythm in an otherwise wild yard. Above, you can see the drama this planting of [Salvia spathacea](#) brings to this space. If it were just one plant it would lose a lot of its impact. Also called massing, or drifting, larger clumps of single varieties are known to attract certain pollinators because of the efficient foraging they offer, making them smart for wildlife too [👉](#).



Think High and Low. Crisp edges and bold patterns in landscaping are another strong cue of management. One way to add this element to a space is to think about elements that are both high (like large shrubs and trees) and low (like many flowering annuals and grasses). All of one or the other can make a space look flat. Turns out this is good for wildlife as well since different animals utilize different kinds of structure for foraging, hiding, reproducing, and displaying. The more a yard provides, the greater diversity of wildlife it has the potential to support.



Line of Sight. In the photo above notice how removing some of the vegetation makes the house visible from the street. This is one of those tricks for improving the perception of landscaping. House is hidden; and, as a result, the yard is seen as unkempt and overgrown. House is visible; and, suddenly a yard seems cared for.



Mix Woody and Herbaceous Plants. Above, we talked about the importance of high and low elements in a wild garden. Here we emphasize the importance of including both herbaceous plants and woody ones, like trees and shrubs. Often doing this will help you bring that “high/low” dynamic into a space, but there are some woody plants that aren’t high at all. Even so, these bring interest and a solidness to a space as the seasons change and herbaceous plants grow and die around the woody ones. A solid mix can also help solve some of the spacing issues described above.



Containers, Structures, Other Objects. Non-plant materials can go a long way towards defining spaces in your yard. The massive planter boxes depicted here elevate an otherwise messy collection of plants. You can accomplish this with a variety of materials such as rocks, paths, containers, and walls.



Wildlife-friendly Elements. Nestboxes, bee houses, and bird feeders and baths are another clear visual indicator to passersby about the intentions of your landscape. Sprinkling these throughout your landscape can help people see that your planting choices are for the birds (or the bees).

A NESTBOX?

checking out the NestWatch Project for [nestbox plans](#) that will work in your area.



Just Add White? This may seem too easy, but we've come across landscapers who swear that adding a white element to a garden in the form of a painted fence or house, is often interpreted as a sign of investment in a property by onlookers. We wonder if this is true for new coat of paint in general, of any color.



Something Linear. Some landscapers, like Pete Veilleux of [East Bay Wilds](#), recommend adding at least one linear element to a wild garden. Examples include a stone wall, clipped hedge, or decorative fence, each of which pulls the eye across a landscape, bringing a clear visual order to a scene.



Cover the Foundation. Plantings to obscure house foundations are a nearly ubiquitously desired landscaping element. While the whole foundation should be hidden, make sure the plantings don't cover any doors or windows. You want the line of sight to these to be open.



Err on the Side of Flowers. Skew plants towards those with large and showing flowers. While many trees, shrubs and herbs have smaller flowers, some natives are known for showy flowers (like Eastern Purple Coneflower ([Echinacea purpurea](#)), Black-eyed Susan ([Rudbeckia fulgida](#)), and Matilija Poppies ([Romneya coulteri](#))). Using a disproportionately large number of these kinds of natives (disproportionate to their normal occurrence in a natural landscape) indicates that this is a designed space.

Ready to get started? Check out our [Local Resources Tool](#) for information about great native plants and other resources local to you, and remember, the goal is to cue onlookers that the space is intentional and cared for. **Do you have any other tricks of the trade to share with us?**

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