



Creating Native Habitat in a “Postage-Stamp” Garden

By Aimee Kohler

SLATE BELT - If you always thought planting with native flowers, shrubs and trees demanded lots of time and space, consider what Paradise Valley gardener Ann Foster and family created in her son's Easton backyard.

“It was fun, and so easy to create in that small space!” Ann said. With brawn provided by husband Steve, the 10' by 10' garden room welcomes humans and other creatures.

As a Penn State Cooperative Extension Master Gardener, Ann has thought a lot about not just the beauty of gardens, but also how they work as part of a natural web of food and shelter for birds, insects, and small mammals.

“Ecosystems have been fragmented,” she said. “But by creating small gardens like this, we create corridors of mini-habitats that support birds, migrating butterflies, and essential pollinators.”

Spaces like these also protect drinking water. Instead of pooling on rock-hard compacted soil or a hot, featureless concrete patio, rainwater is welcome in this urban Eden. Water and snow-melt percolate slowly into the soil, which filters and purifies it — and keeps it from infiltrating the home's foundation.

“We used easy-to-grow stalwarts of the native garden,” said Ann. “Plants like bright crimson bee balm, lavender hyssop and great blue lobelia create a lot of impact. And it's not just visual — the crushed leaves give off a heady fragrance. And natives grow like weeds!”

A water feature, a bird bath, garden art, and beds of native plants and flowers provide habitat for a wide variety of visitors. There's even a kitchen herb garden. Set along a wall warmed by the sun, the herb garden is elevated, making it easy to tend and harvest.

The garden creates an outdoor space that the family enjoys year round, both as a peaceful refuge and for its pleasant views from the house. “We hope someday to see Monarch butterflies stop by,” Ann added. “That will be a red-letter day!”

Whatever the size of your garden, using native plants makes sense, and not just for water quality. They are adapted to local conditions, need very little watering or attention once established, and attract beneficial insects and birds. A great source for plants is Brodhead Watershed Association's annual online native plant sale. For info, go to <https://brodheadwatershed.org/>.

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