



# The Humane Gardener: Nurturing a Backyard Habitat for Wildlife

*Nancy Lawson*

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## **The Humane Gardener: Nurturing a Backyard Habitat for Wildlife** Nancy Lawson

In this eloquent plea for compassion and respect for all species, journalist and gardener Nancy Lawson describes why and how to welcome wildlife to our backyards. Through engaging anecdotes and inspired advice, profiles of home gardeners throughout the country, and interviews with scientists and horticulturalists, Lawson applies the broader lessons of ecology to our own outdoor spaces.

Detailed chapters address planting for wildlife by choosing native species; providing habitats that shelter baby animals, as well as birds, bees, and butterflies; creating safe zones in the garden; cohabiting with creatures often regarded as pests; letting nature be your garden designer; and encouraging natural processes and evolution in the garden. *The Humane Gardener* fills a unique niche in describing simple principles for both attracting wildlife and peacefully resolving conflicts with all the creatures that share our world.

## **The Humane Gardener: Nurturing a Backyard Habitat for Wildlife Details**

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**Nancy Lawson**

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## From Reader Review The Humane Gardener: Nurturing a Backyard Habitat for Wildlife for online ebook

### Adrian Delesdernier says

I love the way this book is written from both a personal and scientific standpoint with stories of individual successes. As someone who considers herself a "humane gardener" already, I learned quite a few things about ways I can improve my garden for wildlife.

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### Mark says

This book was basically a refresher for me with it being about working with nature, instead of against it. Plant FOR nature, and appreciate what comes. Step back and see how the natural world handles things without our involvement and take some cues from it.

She's a bit dreamy-eyed and unrealistic about some of what she advocates. Good ideas, yes, but not always practical.

I was not fond of her constant anthropomorphism of creatures and even "nature" itself.

Animals and insects may do things that result in our benefit, but they don't do it on purpose. They have no idea they are helping us, or even the world. They are simply surviving. Living for themselves and their offspring.

Squirrels and birds do not plant trees on purpose.

Prairie dogs and gophers do not till the soil on purpose.

Statements like this one from the book made me cringe:

"The hidden talents of these animals are best-kept secrets the pest-control and conventional landscaping companies don't want you to know about—for good reason. From foxes and hawks who keep rodents in check to blue jays and squirrels who plant trees that nourish and shelter hundreds of species, our hardworking wild neighbors could put these industries out of business if only we let them."

\*eye roll\*

Let me know when a squirrel can build a patio, a retaining wall, or plant a 14' spruce. I'll wait.

Overall though, I can see this being a good eye opener for people new to this type of gardening. I would have appreciated it more 20 years ago, but the message is still a good one for seasoned gardeners to be reminded of.

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### Chelsea says

I have to admit, when I started this book, I was a little disappointed at how extreme it was. It didn't seem like it allowed for compromise. That being said, it made a very compelling argument on why we should plant primarily natives and gave practical suggestions on inviting wildlife. The final chapters rounded it out, with examples that were more middle of the road. We have a tiny vegetable garden and hoped to add an herb garden, but after reading this, I hope to incorporate a lot more wildflowers.

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## Colleen says

I hope every animal lover and animal advocate reads this book. So many of us are (necessarily and understandably) advocating for animals thousands or hundreds of miles away on factory farms, laboratories, fur farms, etc), and while we should never stop, we can at the same time do SO much in our backyards -- literally. A must read for compassionate people.

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## Melissa says

Wonderful book that provides a plethora of info to change how we care for our lawns and land. The wellbeing of nature has been my passion and this book is helping with my knowledge.

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## Rose Lemberg says

4.5 stars.

This is a great book, but at times I basically felt that the author was suggesting that I let my yard go wild and go away to give the animals some privacy. Thing is... I'm all for that approach. I did that in my first home. We had the most amazing patch of wilderness that I very much opted not to mow, prune, or weed; a home to many butterflies, birds, rabbits, turtles, and even a coyote visitor. The city sent me frequent "mow-or-fine" warnings and I had to do violence to that piece of land or else be fined (and they would mow it anyway). It would be great to get some [more] advice about negotiating these issues while maintaining a wild space in a suburban environment. The author did suggest putting out signs, but I am not sure it would be enough, here.

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## Frank says

As someone who has been gardening professionally for nearly 40 years I found Nancy Lawson's book an interesting, informative, and provocative read, although there were a few things I would take issue with. As someone who has run a practice that is pesticide and herbicide free and who eschews gas powered blowers and ornamental front lawns I am very sympathetic to the authors approach. And even though this book gave me a better appreciation and awareness of gardening from the point of view of a naturalist, I think that there is a bit too much of a fundamentalist ideological perspective that is not only impractical for the average homeowner but also irritating in a way that may turn off people who might have some small inclination to garden in a humane way using good cultural practices.

This hard core ideology is certainly thought provoking: for example, I wonder how most experienced gardeners will respond to the idea that honeybees, earthworms, mulching and deadheading are negative components of a healthy garden. The history and impact of these elements in the American garden are certainly worthy of consideration but it is impossible to accurately assess the full net value of them without taking into account each particular context.

First off, one thing that will stand out for any landscaper is that none of the photos in the book show any of the gardens featured with a broad perspective. What you do have, and what you might expect from a naturalist and not a gardener or landscaper, are lots of close up photos of animals and insects. I know enough

about the types of gardens in this book to know that they are the kind of wild mess that very few people are going to appreciate or even be able to feature in the urban and suburban areas in which I work. There is something to be said for the art of landscaping, and we have a long historical legacy from the Greeks and Romans, Moors, Persians and Europeans, as well of those of the Aztecs, to draw on to create our personal paradise. I believe that this can be done in an intelligent, sensitive and sustainable way while using good aesthetic principles that uplift us and connect us to plants. I don't see any examples of this in the book.

The format of the book is that each chapter is dedicated to a different "gardener" and "garden." Something that stood out for me was that each of these properties featured was 1 plus acres. I think this clearly defines a scope of privilege to which most homeowners are completely excluded. It makes perfect sense to me that keeping large parts of a garden wild and as a habitat for wildlife in gardens of this size would be appropriate and I applaud that. How to make this approach functional within the smaller spaces in which most of us live and work is not addressed at all. The title of this book could have been, more appropriately, "Nurturing an Estate habitat for Wildlife."

As one might expect, the subject of native plants is addressed. I have to say that the book has inspired me to want to use more native plants in my gardens and I am looking forward to doing so. On the other hand, I feel the emphasis on using natives is a bit overdone. Here is the reality: it is simply too late to turn back the clocks on non-native introduced plants in our gardens. Yes, we should try to control as many invasive non-native plants as we can. But the idea of only using native plants...

Interestingly, Lawson does address the idea of "nativism" as being a racist concept, even citing the "Nazi-connection" link between fascism and native plant gardening, and she also does allow for the fact that many exotic species provide valuable habitat for wildlife.

I think that the most valuable contribution of this book is the emphasis on the interconnections and interdependence of the plant, animal, and insect life in our gardens. It is so true, as she states, that the petrochemical industries have conditioned so many people to fear creatures that are part of the dynamic of life that is happening right outside our doors. To this end I think the book is a success. It would be great to see a follow up work that is more appropriate to the gardens in which most of us live and work.

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## **Paul says**

Finally some humane-and common sense-talk about the wildlife we share our backyards with! Lawson calls out many of the common myths and ridiculous views people often have about animals such as opossums, raccoons, coyotes, etc. She explains how these animals all have behaviors and habits that are actually very beneficial to the health of our yards and gardens. Humans have been persecuting many varieties of wildlife, some for centuries now, due to erroneous beliefs about them. This is a wonderful (and beautiful) book full of smart advice for the gardener or just the person who simply wants a healthier way to plan their lawn space. Highly recommended!

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## **Abby says**

So inspiring! Nancy Lawson makes a powerful case for gardeners to focus on native plants and cultivate landscapes to benefit wildlife. I read it swiftly and eagerly, ready to get back into my yard and make plans for adding more native wildflowers and shrubs. I felt persuaded, too, that gardening in this way is the best chance we have at stalling, at least in our own local sphere, the grave threats to our planet. The photographs

and gardener profiles throughout are wonderful, too. I'm looking forward to following her blog eagerly.

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## Grace says

I hope this book finds it's way to people who have little interest in ecological gardening, because for me it's just preaching to the choir— although I did learn some things I hadn't previously known. I worked in a garden center for 8 years, and now that I don't work there anymore, my passion for gardening has grown. I thought about this and I contribute it to the fact that I had to sell chemicals, lawn fertilizers, answer questions about which color flowers would match a house, tell people how to eliminate clover and dandelions from their lawn...it all seemed like such a chore and the gardening magazines I read while standing at the counter on humid and slow summer days emphasized design and what would spark visual interest and it all seemed like there were so many rules you had to follow and bugs and creatures to worry about. I kept some flowers I liked but didn't go much further than keeping a small patio flower garden with a small handful of annuals every year.

then a couple years ago I moved in with my fiancé and started observing the backyard. I noticed in the summer that this typical suburban backyard had more fireflies in it than I'd ever seen anywhere else. I learned that fireflies favored areas that were kept dark at night, free of pesticides, and where some grass was allowed to grow long. I also had a hibiscus in a pot that a hummingbird visited one day while I was reading outside. I realized I could create habitat in my own backyard and last year I began digging up areas for wildflowers and vegetables. last year I became obsessed with native bees when I saw all kinds of bees I'd never seen before show up in the areas where I spread wildflower seed. in addition to 4 vegetable beds, I planted 2 apple trees which became the centerpieces of 2 fruit tree guilds, spread wildflower seed in a couple areas, started a compost pile, took down invasive plants and vines, and am still busily planting native plants for pollinators and wildlife. I don't spray pesticides of any kind, chemical or organic. I use organic fertilizer for the veggies as necessary. so this book probably wasn't intended for me, as I'm already pretty deep into the practice of "humane gardening". last year I also certified my garden with the National Wildlife Federation as a certified wildlife habitat.

at the end of each chapter a different gardener is profiled about how they transformed sometimes barren landscapes into their own personal oases. I loved these because I saw so much of myself in these gardeners, these are my people! all last summer I went out to my yard to crouch and crawl around with my camera to see who'd shown up— many different species of native bees, dragonflies, a few species of wasps, butterflies (including monarchs, painted ladies, mourning cloaks), moths, caterpillars, beetles...I was pretty delighted to read about others doing the same.

I know some people think this way of gardening is "extreme" and that native plant gardening isn't "real" gardening and that it's always a big mess and that it's pointless to try and restore habitat that can't be "fully" restored. but ecological gardening can still be attractive (my backyard is absolutely my favorite place to be in the summer and fall). I would rather have a somewhat untamed and whimsical looking yard that nurtures life than a boring, sterile carpet of grass and sad looking bedding annuals that's neurotically maintained with chemical fertilizers and pesticides into a lifeless wasteland that just looks nice and benefits nothing except your eyes.

getting back to the book, I do think the author should have addressed invasive plants a little more. while not everything that's not native is harmful to the landscape, a balanced discussion of natives and invasives was needed.

while I bought this book new, I will probably be leaving it in a Little Free Library in the hope that it reaches

someone and inspires them to begin a humane garden of their own.

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### **Perri says**

This book is a little more extreme than I'm willing to go, but there were still much food for thought. Using more native plants, tolerating imperfections in the garden, understanding the balance of interacting species, avoiding use of pesticides and herbicides... a lot of good take-aways for me. But I can't imagine ever cohabiting peacefully with bunnies...grrr

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### **Kirsten says**

Brimming with compassion and common sense...a fabulous way to say "F\*\*K YOU" to the chemical age. I'm in.

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### **Peacegal says**

4.5 stars--THE HUMANE GARDENER is a wonderfully written and beautifully presented (lots of color photos!) book that should be read by not just gardeners, but anyone with even the smallest patch of lawn to their name. It would make a really nice gift, as well.

While many people think of "saving wildlife" and "preserving the environment" as abstract concepts miles or even continents away, Lawson reminds us that there is plenty of overlooked nature literally right outside our doors. There is so much we personally can do to prevent species extinction and needless suffering, by making the simplest changes in how we care for our yards, gardens, and flowerbeds.

I am happy to say my yard is a bit of a riot of both wild and planted species, including irises, hostas, Rose of Sharon, various small trees, random flowers, and Jerusalem artichoke. However, after learning about the downsides of some of the cultivated species, I am glad I purchased and planted a package of native wildflowers from a regional wildlife preserve. Tellingly, these flowers are gigantic and sturdy, while the marigolds, begonias, and other flowers I bought from a big box store have remained in pretty much stunted condition.

Granted, I won't allow them to grow from cracks in the driveway because of the destruction that causes, but I don't get upset about weeds in my lawn. I don't pull up anything except thistles and poison ivy, owing to the delightful rashes they cause. Purslane, dandelions, and wild onions are edible, so they're OK. Clover is good for the soil and it feeds honeybees, so why kill it? The dreaded weeds my grandpa used to refer to as "pig ears" are the only thing that seem to be able to survive my dog's apparently weapons-grade pee, and I like that patch of yard green better than brown and dead!

I learned a lot from this book and most likely, so will you.

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## **S says**

The main problem with this book is probably that it will end up preaching to the choir.(!)  
I was already a member of that choir, and reading this only makes me want to sing louder (oh no!).

Everyone knows we live in a complex world of interrelationships - this book does a great job of making that concrete, and talking about the ways that so many things we do without thinking have wider effects, as well as looking at the variety of ways we can bring interest to the landscape by seeking harmony instead of control.

In too many cases, we know not what we do, and are easily swayed by the marketing tactics of big companies whose interest is \$ rather than balance. Spraying for pests not only kills insects and other small creatures (those tiny cute lizards! frogs!), it also removes the food source for the majority of nestling birds. Is it any wonder that birds and pollinator populations are falling off so drastically? :(

A great discussion of gardening as living IN the world as opposed to ON it.  
It made me see the dead tree in my yard from a whole different perspective.

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## **Kelly says**

An inspiring and hopeful read, especially for a topic that could otherwise tend towards preachiness. I'm looking at my backyard with fresh eyes and am excited to make it an even more welcoming spot to animal and insect friends of all stripes, spots, and sorts.

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