

WORKING WITH NATURE



Michael Hollins, shown in his Harford County nursery, is head of a company that helps landowners manage and restore wetlands, streams, forests and shorelines.

THE SUN/AMY DAVIS

By Linda Lowe Morris

It's late morning, leaning hard on lunch time, and the blueberries growing here at Michael Hollins' nursery are starting to look mighty tempting.

"Go ahead," he says. "Have some. They're great."

He pops one of the deep purple berries into his mouth, then leans over for more serious picking. "They just need a few more days and they'll be *really* sweet."

But food for people is not the ultimate destiny of these plants — in spite of their delectable flavor on this steamy summer morning. Their destiny instead is to be used to provide cover and food for wildlife.

Mr. Hollins is a terrestrial and aquatic ecologist and botanist — and these blueberries are among more than 50,000 native plants that he grows at this Harford County nursery, one of just three conservation nurseries in the entire mid-Atlantic region.

The nursery is a part of a larger company he started three years ago called Envirens Inc., headquartered in Timonium, which does environmental inventories, management and restoration for wetlands, streams, forests and shorelines.

"This high-bush blueberry," he says, straightening up from his foraging, "is the same species that's propagated by blueberry growers, but it's also great for backyard wildlife plantings."

Blueberries, he continues, are rarely used as ornamental plants in the garden but they could be. "They're just as nice as hollies and they don't get insects or diseases. Natively, low bush blueberries grow on dry ridges of chestnut oak or black oak. So if a homeowner has a woodland and a lot of things wouldn't grow there, these do fine."

While Mr. Hollins and his staff of designers, ecologists and site planners usually focus on large projects — for a developer who might want an overall environmental plan before starting to build houses, for a company that needs to move a stream

and is forced by local regulations to restore it, for a shoreline that has to be stabilized — they also work with private homeowners to establish backyard habitats.

Few people think of their back yard as a habitat, but the average yard is home to dozens, perhaps hundreds, of different species of animals, insects and plants. And as more and more people move out into the country, the preservation of these back yards as homes for wildlife becomes crucial.

"There's so much that goes on in the woods and fields and streams of the environment that surrounds us that folks are so unaware of," Mr. Hollins says. "And what we really try to do — at least with backyard and estate management — is to get people associated with the land. We try to open their eyes up to a living world."

People are usually surprised to find they have 15 to 20 or maybe even 100 birds on their property, he continues. "And there are things like flying squirrels some people had never heard of before, much less to think that they live in some trees in their woods."

"Generally we find that most people are sensitive to wildlife. They prefer to nurture and conserve it. They don't want to blatantly destroy wildlife."

Even a back yard as small as ¼ acre can be made into a wildlife habitat, he says.

"Generally for the smaller backyard people, it's a matter of landscape design using native plants that attract wildlife, especially birds. Most folks don't want to attract opossum and raccoons to their back yard perhaps, but they'd like to see the colorful songbirds."

Homeowners with a small yard should concentrate on planting a diversity of plant species, Mr. Hollins says. These should be plants that offer many different types of food for the birds and provide them with cover as well.

At the same time these plants are feeding the birds, they can have an ornamental value to homeowners, he adds, either in flower or fruit or fall

foliage color. Spicebush, for instance, has tiny flowers very early before anything else is in bloom. And the viburnum species and elderberries have white flower clusters in summer.

"In order to attract songbirds," he says, "you need three food sources: insects, fruits and seeds. So you want to select the right trees and shrubs that will provide those."

Most people think of insects in the garden as pests, he continues. "But many of the caterpillars that we consider pests are very good summer foods for songbirds. Most of the warblers and thrushes and other songbirds in general are insect feeders in the summertime. In the fall, when the insect populations have dropped, they switch to fruit."

Shrubs like some of the viburnums and trees like sassafras and the smaller spicebush provide songbirds with food in the fall.

"The red cedar, our native *Juniperus virginiana*, is excellent bird food. And it also provides evergreen winter cover. Other evergreens could include hemlock, Norway spruce and white pine. Most of the conifers have a different group of species they would attract, the seed eaters like crossbills and the larger finches like evening and pine grosbeaks."

"Sweet gum, and other small seed producers, are very good for attracting smaller finches like goldfinches. Goldfinches just have a feast on sweet gum balls. Sweet gum also has no insect or disease problems. And it has a really interesting fall color of yellows, oranges and purples all on the same tree," he adds.

An overall planting design should incorporate tiers, or layers, of plants, he says, "a low ground layer, then a taller shrub layer and then somewhat of a tree or canopy layer."

Water is also an important thing to provide for the birds. "Water can be worked in as a focal point, maybe a pool or a waterfall or a fountain."

Some variation in the topography would also be good to work into the

plan. He adds, "You could build some berms to create an undulating effect in the habitat so that it's not all flat."

For larger properties, Envirens does management plans for woods, open lands, ponds and streams.

If someone has a fallow field that they really don't need for crop production, he says, they could allow it to mature into a woodland. "We may recommend seeding it with certain grasses or legumes to attract game birds like quail or pheasant. And we could plan a mowing schedule that minimizes damage to wildlife. We might recommend, for instance, early spring mowing once a year so that rabbits and such could proliferate during the summer and overwinter in an overgrown field."

"We may even recommend the planting of seed sources like ash and cedar and black cherry so these trees could start seeding the field in order for it to eventually succeed into a forest."

Owners of larger pieces of property can obviously do more things, but they also might have to balance agricultural uses with wildlife habitat.

"If the landowner wants to establish more game habitat but he needs to farm his land, in a lot of cases he may not need to farm right down to the stream bank, or he may not need to eliminate all the hedgerows," he says.

For ponds, Envirens has designed a shrub thicket to provide cover and food for wildlife, and will ring the perimeter of the pond with wetland plants.

And if there is woodland on the property, that too might need some work. "If there are dead trees in a forest, we will often recommend leaving them. But if a forest has no dead trees on the ground and no decomposing organic matter other than leaves, we'll sometimes recommend that they cut a tree or two, because the insects that inhabit those decomposing logs are very good food sources for mammals that eat grubs like raccoons, chipmunks, opossums and even foxes."

From The Baltimore Sun, Saturday, July 14, 1990.

For more information on designing and planting a backyard habitat,

Contact Envirens, Inc.

1927 York Road

Timonium, Maryland 21093

(301) 560-2288