

Gardening for Wildlife

Question: Should I attract wildlife to my garden, and if yes, how?

Answer: Inviting wildlife like birds, butterflies, lizards, and more into the garden makes gardening come alive! And by planting natives, you will foster the growth and health of your outdoor space by creating an ecosystem perfect for San Diego.

Few places possess the biological richness of our home in San Diego County. In fact, San Diego is deemed a “Biological Hotspot” because of the high species richness that is unparalleled in the continental United States. One way we can help protect the large number of unique species is to landscape our homes with native plants. Think about it. Millions of years have honed the relationships between the endemic flora and fauna to the perfection that exists today.

Look around your community. Likely you’ll see many gardens with exotic plant species that seldom feed any local wildlife. The nectar from that tropical hibiscus or rosemary is not nearly as nutritious for our hummingbirds and bees as is the nectar produced by natively occurring *Salvia mellifera* or *Phacelia campanularia*. Local plants offer optimal nutrition for local fauna. In fact, exotic species are often poisonous to our fauna. For example, *Nandina* berries, although eaten by local birds, may kill them if consumed to excess.

Another example: *Pyracantha* has fruit that the birds relish. However, recent studies show that not only is the nutrition superior in local plants, but the phenology or timing of the plants makes all the difference to the reproductive success of the creatures that evolved to eat the plants. So, even though a species of bird will consume fruit from non-native plant species, their reproductive fitness is decreased just enough to negatively affect the birth rate. Both the timing of the crop and the nutrition of non-natives are inferior to the native species.

Not only do native plants provide excellent nutrition, they are also drought tolerant. In San Diego we typically get less than a foot of rain a year, and only in winter and spring. Native plants have evolved to be able to survive on little water in the colder months and no water in the summer. Locally-sourced native plants can fine-tune their drought tolerance to match the conditions in your home garden. That means little-to-no supplementary water, even in the summertime.

Here are a few things to keep in mind when seeking to attract wildlife to the garden.

- 1) Plant trees. If you have room, plant a native oak which will support far more species of wildlife than any other plant!
- 2) Plant mostly natives. While it’s fun to plant some non-natives, studies show that a garden with at least 70% natives, will help wildlife reproduction.
- 3) Use plants instead of feeders to feed hummingbirds. Native *Salvias*, *Sphaeralcea*, *Ribes*, and so many more feed hummingbirds, bees, and other insects. A hummingbird’s diet ideally is 80% INSECTS not nectar from a feeder. Plants create homes for the insects a hummingbird and her babies depend on for good health.
- 4) Leave some mess in your garden. Last year’s hollow stems will become home to this year’s baby bees. That pile of rocks or wood in the corner can house bees, lizards and more. Leave bare earth for native bees to nest in.
- 5) When planting, keep in mind vertical space. Species richness is always greater in gardens with trees, shrubs, and groundcovers, not just perennials.
- 6) Include a water feature accessible by wildlife.
- 7) Keep an organic garden, free from all pesticides.

The biological richness of San Diego County means we have many species of plants from which to choose. So, let's do this! Let's plant natives and let's bring back the waning populations of birds, butterflies, and bees. We have the power to keep San Diego biologically rich and diverse.



Figure 1 *Ribes speciosum* a hummingbird favorite



Figure 2 *Salvia spathacea* shade plant for hummingbirds



Figure 3 *Phacelia Campanularia* Beloved by Bumblebees

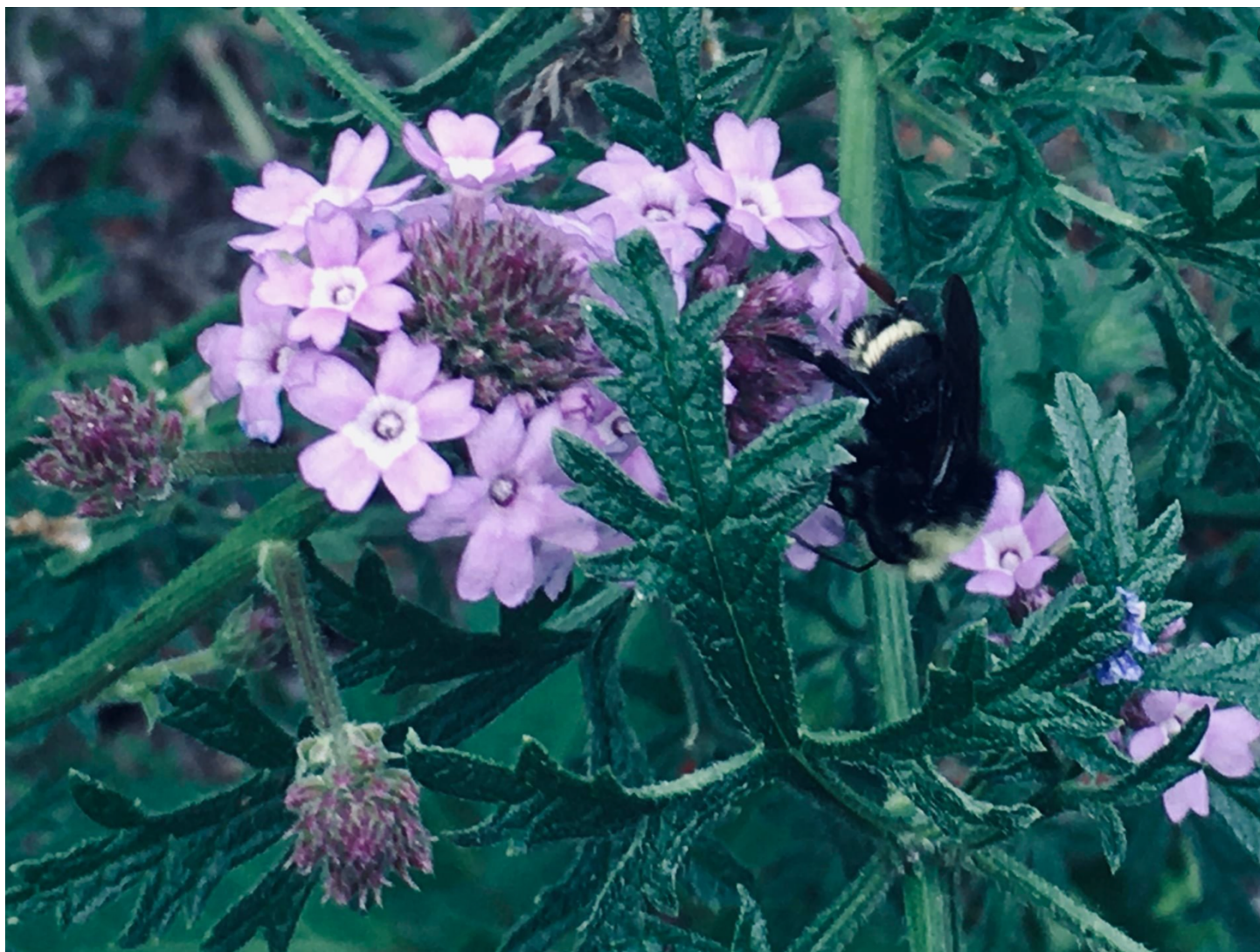


Figure 4 *Verbena lilacina* with *Bombus vosnesenskii*