



Bird-Friendly Habitat Certification Program Toolkit

Guidance and Resources for Creating a
Residential Habitat Certification Program

Presented by New Hope Bird Alliance
with support from Village and Wilderness

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Quick Start Guide

- The Bird Friendly Habitat Certification Program provides 1:1 consultations that educate and empower property owners to improve habitat for birds, wildlife and people.
- The 1:1 consultations build a relationship with participants which we believe is the “special sauce” that makes the program impactful for both people and habitat.
- The certification process includes an in-person site visit, a checklist of habitat features and actions, a written report of site observations and priority activities, a catalog of regional and local resources, and a yard sign.
- An ability to use Google Forms, Word documents, Google documents, Google sheets and excel spreadsheets is necessary for volunteers to enter availability, track visit requests and write reports. Many volunteers do this on a limited basis.
- This toolkit includes template files, examples, and lists for you to use and adapt to your program needs.
- The program is run by volunteers in 4 roles: Program Coordinator, Scheduler, Recorder, Plant Expert.
- Key steps in starting your own program:
 1. Define your program scope, goals, and geographic service area.
 2. Assemble a volunteer team by tapping relevant interest groups.
 3. Review and adapt the templates and materials to your region and program scope.
 4. Identify local partners and resources to share with participants, such as native plant nurseries, invasive plant removal advice and contractors, etc.
 5. Practice certifying properties of team members, friends, and family and adapt the program as needed.
 6. Promote the program through a website, share with local interest groups, and table at community events.
- New Hope Bird Alliance (newhopebird@gmail.com) is available to help answer questions and provide assistance.

Introduction – Why a Certification Program?

The global scale of environmental threats can be overwhelming, but we can each make a meaningful difference at the scale of our own patios, yards, and neighborhoods. No matter the size of our outdoor space, we can take action to build a healthy habitat and observe the diversity of life that finds shelter there. For most property owners, starting this journey of creating backyard habitat can be daunting, with hundreds of excellent resources available on any niche topic you can Google. The Bird-Friendly Habitat (BFH) Certification Program aims to provide a set of holistic, achievable goals that educate and encourage people of all experience levels to steward healthy habitat in their own yards.

This certification program provides a tested framework that combines science-based metrics, peer-to-peer learning, and community building to empower a network of informed, local stewards to make meaningful change within and beyond their property lines. The process of achieving certification includes an in-person site visit, a checklist of holistic habitat features and actions, a written report of site observations and priority actions, a catalog of regional and local resources, and (usually) the presentation of a yard sign. Our metrics are rooted in science but our main goal is to be encouraging and approachable; to give people a basic knowledge that inspires action and further learning.

Offering a certification program as compared to a consultation service alone offers goals to achieve, fosters a long-term commitment to improving habitat, and encourages relationship building. Offering levels of achievement motivates improvement by outlining steps to improve and reach a goal of certification. When our team is invited back for a second visit, the property owner proudly tours us around, telling stories of their hard work and who they have met along the way. Our certification yard signs support a key tenant of native habitat stewardship: they provide a cue to care or intentionality. Achieving a yard sign is itself a goal for the property owner, but the yard sign then serves as a legible, educational notice to neighbors that this yard is cared for and the actions are intentional, even if they are unconventional. These signs often spark a neighbor to participate in the program as well, and impact radiates out to form a network of healthy habitat (see example below). The certification program fosters a community of like-minded stewards who are participating in habitat improvement. It is a source of pride and unity to be a part of the Bird-Friendly Habitat Certification Program. We thank you for making an effort to start a certification program in your area – the birds and your community will thank you, too.

The maps below show the spread of our certification program in one neighborhood from 2023 to 2024. In this neighborhood, 5 new residents reached out to us in 2024, likely because they saw a program sign in their neighborhood. Due to an amazing team and engaging signage, this program encourages a network of habitat across a rapidly urbanizing landscape. These habitat networks are key to supporting birds, wildlife, and biodiversity.

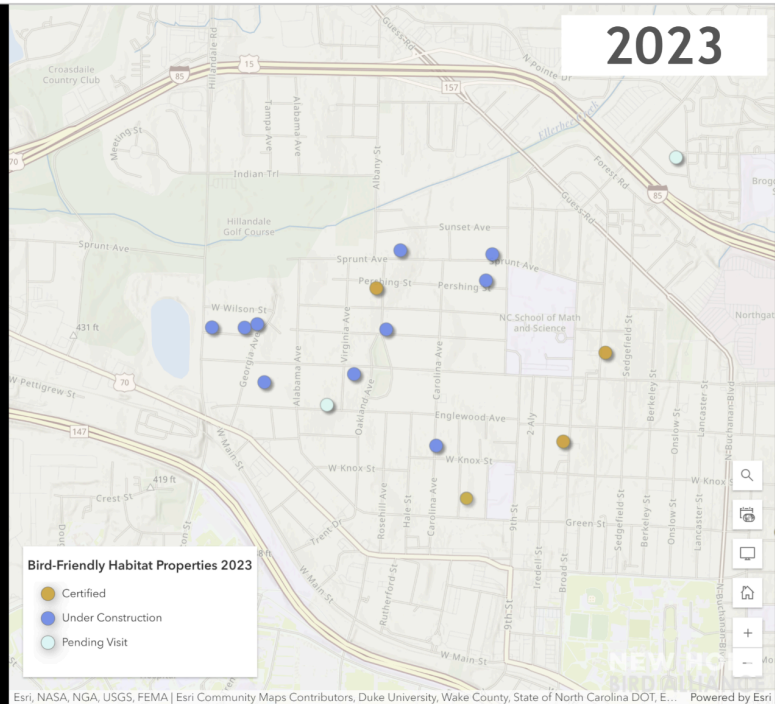
Building a Habitat Network

2023
16 Properties Engaged

10 Under Construction

4 Certified

2 Pending Visit



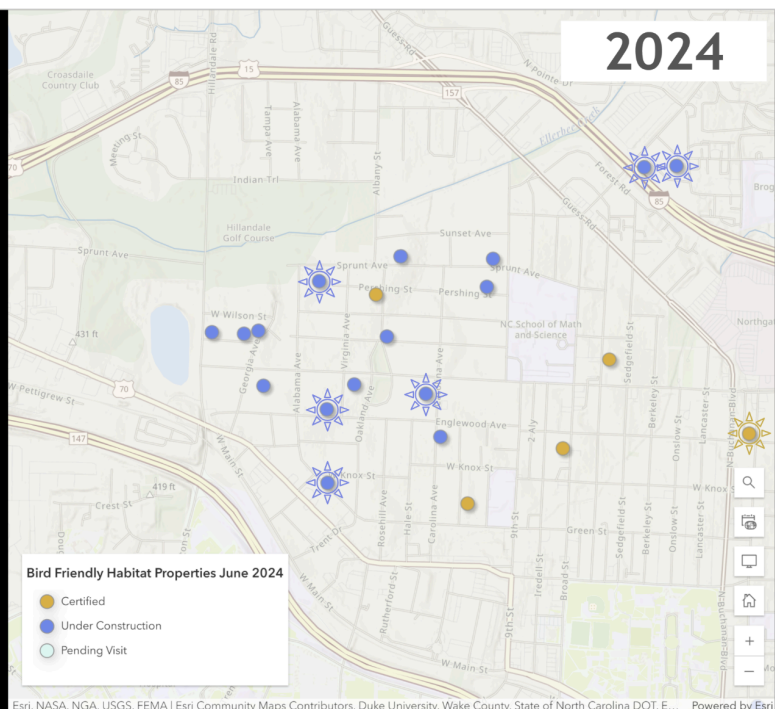
Building a Habitat Network

2023 → 2024
16 Properties Engaged → 21 Properties Engaged

10 Under Construction → 16 Under Construction

4 Certified → 5 Certified

2 Pending Visit



From 2023 to June 2024, 5 new residents in this neighborhood enrolled in the BFH Certification Program (stars indicate new or improved habitat). Through signage and word of mouth, the Certification Program is inspiring a network of habitat and good stewards.

Overarching Philosophy

Benefits of Native Plants

Why natives? Our native, local vegetation evolved with insects, birds, and other animals to create complex food webs above and below ground. Wildlife consumes fruits, nuts, and seeds for sustenance, while helping to propagate the regional vegetation. Native plants, especially some tree species like oaks, are also host to a large variety of insects, which in turn are eaten by birds and other animals. Young songbird nestlings, in particular, must consume large numbers of insects in their first weeks of life.

Non-native vegetation can provide some fruits, nuts, and seeds, but it does not host the insects that are vital to birds and the web of life. As their seeds are spread by wildlife, many non-native plants become “invasive” by out-competing local vegetation and disrupting the local ecology.

It is important for each program to define what will be considered “native.” In *Nature’s Best Hope*, [Doug Tallamy](#) defines native plants as those “that share an evolutionary history with the plant and animal communities in your ecoregion.” This shared history must have extended over many thousands of years before the plants support the food webs necessary to sustain life. So, the first step in finding your native plant community is to define your ecoregion. Benjamin Vogt in his book, *Prairie Up: An Introduction to Natural Garden Design*, recommends using the EPA’s map of the 105 [Level III Ecoregions of the Continental United States](#). For example, this puts us in the Piedmont ecoregion.

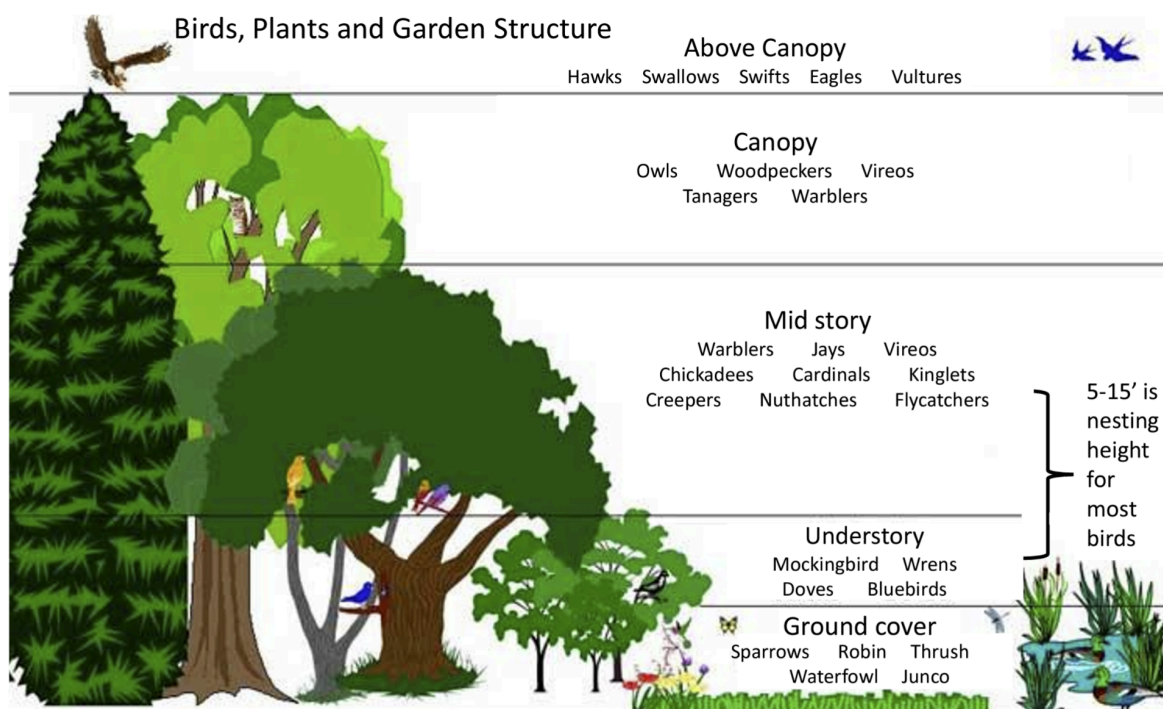
The next step is to identify the plants native to your area. In North Carolina, Audubon North Carolina maintains a database of native plants, which is currently accessed from this webpage, [700 Bird-Friendly Native Plants for North Carolina](#). We used it as a starting point and continuing reference as we created our own lists for the Piedmont. You can download a spreadsheet from that webpage giving a lot of useful information about the plants, which are labeled as to whether they are native to the NC ecoregions of Mountains, Piedmont, and/or Coastal Plain. Outside of our state, you can start to create lists to use for your area from the [National Wildlife Federation’s Native Plant Finder](#), [National Audubon’s Native Plants for Birds](#), and hopefully from some local sources. [Weakley’s Flora of the Southeastern United States](#) is our best regional guide to confirm whether a particular species is native to one or more of our 3 NC ecoregions. Outside of our area, you can use the [USDA Plants Database](#) to look up a plant and then double click on their map to zoom in until it reaches a county level of specificity to determine native status in your ecoregion.

Doug Tallamy has developed the concept of keystone species to describe the native plant genera that support the most caterpillars and thus are some of the best food sources for baby birds. [Research by Doug and his students at the University of Delaware](#) has identified that 14% of our native plants support 90% of the butterfly and moth (*Lepidoptera*) species. We created a Keystone Plants spreadsheet listing the plant genera that host the largest number of butterfly and moth caterpillars by using a combination of the National Wildlife Federation’s

lookup tool to “[Find Native Keystone Plants for Your Zip Code](#)” and their “[Keystone Plants by Ecoregion lists](#)”. Using this combination, we were able to find the top tree, shrub, perennial, and vine genera narrowed down to our ecoregion of the Piedmont. For us, this turned out to be 33 genera that hosted at least 50 butterfly and moth caterpillars.

Vegetative layers and Birds

In the eastern United States, many habitat types feature distinct vegetative layers or niches. Forests are/were the most common habitat type and as such, our program encourages native plants at all forest layers: Canopy trees, understory trees, shrub, vine, and groundcover. The reasoning behind this is that by providing more layers, a habitat can provide an ecological niche for a greater diversity of species. Not every yard can support each layer, particularly canopy trees on very small properties, and we modify on a case-by-case basis.



Graphic by [Leigh Pickering](#).

Inclusion of as many vegetative layers as possible will lead to more biodiversity in your yard. Different species of birds tend to inhabit different layers in our yard. For example, pine warblers and brown-headed nuthatches tend to inhabit the tops of trees, whereas bluebird, cardinals and blue jays inhabit middle story areas, and many sparrows and thrushes tend to inhabit the lower and ground levels of habitat. Birds can certainly move between the different habitats in their search for food and other resources.

Straight Species vs. Cultivars

Straight species of native plants have grown in a particular area or ecoregion for hundreds or even thousands of years, are open-pollinated, and grow true to seed. These are preferred if available because they continue to support plant diversity and insects evolved with them. Cultivars are primarily plants that are the result of selective breeding by humans, although there are instances where plants mutate and create a cultivar. Hybrids are the result of a genetic cross between two different species. A plant label will give the genera and species in italics, followed by another descriptive name in single quotes. This last name indicates that the plant is a cultivar. An example of a naturally occurring cultivar is the coral honeysuckle *Lonicera sempervirens* 'Major Wheeler'.

Cultivars have been developed for attractive characteristics such as flower color, plant height, winter hardiness etc. Studies have shown that the more manipulated the cultivars become, the less attractive they are to pollinators. In particular, it is best to avoid cultivars with double-flowers and sterility. Work on woody plant cultivars has shown that insects are deterred from eating cultivars where green leaves have been modified to red, purple or blue. Tallamy explains, "Red leaves remove chlorophyll from the leaf and load it with anthocyanins, which just happen to be feeding deterrents." Cultivars that differ significantly in color and morphology from the native species should be used cautiously.

Invasive Plants

Invasive plants pose a significant threat to the persistence of native plant communities, thus a key element of the BFH (Bird-Friendly Habitat) Certification Program is educating landowners how to identify, manage, and reduce consumer demand for invasive species.

Invasive plants aggressively outcompete native vegetation both within and beyond property boundaries. Invasive plants have two characteristics: 1) nonnative in origin and 2) ability to spread aggressively and outcompete native vegetation. Nonnative, invasive plants displace native vegetation to create large areas of monoculture (e.g. kudzu vine), destabilizing natural ecosystems, reducing biodiversity, and changing soil properties. Because invasive species are defined by their ability to spread (by seed, roots, etc.), having an invasive plant on one's property is a threat to neighboring properties and natural areas.

Educating landowners how to identify and manage invasive species at home empowers individuals to take action at a local level. We have imported many of the common plants seen in neighborhood gardens based largely on their value as ornamental, lawn and garden plants. While some non-native plants stay within the confines of our gardens and can be used as decorative species, other imported, non-native plants readily spread outside their original boundaries, displacing native plants and becoming serious threats to ecosystems such as wetlands and the wildlife that depends on them. Most people don't even realize that commonly seen plants like Bradford Pear trees, Chinese Privet, Japanese Honeysuckle, and Nandina are nonnative and have become serious invasive threats. During a Certification Visit, the plant

expert and recorder identify invasive plants for the landowner, mark them with flagging tape (if desired), describe removal methods, and share resources to learn more. This education often spreads through curious neighbors or the landowner themselves offering to control invasive species on nearby properties.

Removing existing invasive plants is essential to creating bird-friendly habitat, but engaging landowners as informed consumers can reduce demand and future propagation at a commercial scale. Many invasive plants were imported by the nursery trade and continue to be sold without a warning label. The BFH Certification Program shares a [“Shun List”](#) developed by the North Carolina Invasive Plant Council, which identifies 41 of the most aggressive invasive species still being sold in the state. Developing a “Shun List” as a tool to empower individuals as consumers is one way to influence the nursery industry.



Volunteers removing mounds of privet and other invasive plants from a riparian area on Booker Creek, Chapel Hill.

Below are different methods your team can use to educate the public and reduce the spread of invasive species:

1. Knowledgeable volunteers educate landowners during the Certification Visit by identifying, labeling, and advising control methods for invasive plants on the property.

2. Require that certified properties have a low percent coverage of invasive species (complete elimination can be discouraging).
3. Share printed brochures and/or digital web-based resources on invasive plants.
4. Share a resource on controlling invasive plant species, concise and local if possible.
5. Share a “Shun List” of invasive species sold in local nurseries.
6. Work with local or regional partners to fund or develop resources mentioned above.
Examples include state invasive plant councils, state departments of natural resources, state extension services, botanic gardens, land conservancies, natural areas managers, and other conservation nonprofits.

Other Invasive Plant Resources:

- NC State Extension Service: [Invasive species](#)
- NC Invasive Plant Council: [Invasive plants listed by threat level](#)
- Other sources for invasive plant identification: [Invasive Plant Atlas of the United States](#)

Reach out to your local Extension office, Invasive Plant Council, Native Plant Society, land trust, or natural areas management department to find potential partners.



Eastern Bluebird on eastern redbud (Cercis canadensis) (photo by Barbara Driscoll).

Encouragement, not Judgment

The BFH Certification Program is an educational outreach program and as such, our goal is to encourage, support, and inspire healthy habitat stewardship. This perspective is key to understanding how we decided to define a “Certified Property”. Our definition of a Certified Property is not 100% native or restored, pristine habitat. Holding a standard that is unachievable to most people will not have the reach or impact at a landscape level; it will discourage rather than encourage. Instead, we chose to certify properties that demonstrate a commitment to improving habitat. The program is more about the journey than the final destination.

One important aspect of encouraging change is to avoid judgment. Placing a judgment value on plants as “good” or “bad” can evoke an emotional or even negative response from landowners. We are careful to not vilify plants (or landowners) and instead focus on interesting facts, exciting observations, and opportunities to support more wildlife. For example, landowners may value a non-native plant because it was from their parents or someone close to them or it invokes childhood memories, and we need to be respectful of this emotional link.

Designing a program

Audience: What Size and Charging a Fee

When deciding the extent of your program's service area, consider where your volunteers may come from and how far they may have to drive to reach properties for a yard visit. Start small, perhaps a city limit, and expand as your volunteer team allows.

The New Hope Bird Alliance (NBHA) chapter covers roughly 3 counties (1,410 square miles) and offers yard visits to anyone within that area. At the time of writing, the NHBA team includes 22 volunteers (2 Coordinators, 3 Schedulers, 11 Recorders, and 10 Plant Experts). Many volunteer team members drive over 40 minutes one-way to a yard visit; this is likely too much to ask of a new volunteer group. Consult with interested volunteers about a traveling distance they are comfortable with and select a service area with that in mind.

Defining an audience also includes deciding what type of properties to include. Decide early on whether your program will include large personal properties (e.g. over 10 acres) or commercial properties, places of worship, HOAs or schools. Corporations with larger campuses may also be interested and they can be quite extensive (100 acres or more). We have developed separate criteria for these types of properties as they typically have a landscaping budget. That is outside the scope of this toolkit. One example program, [Bird Alliance of Oregon's Backyard Habitat Certification Program](#), only certifies yards which are less than one acre.

Most volunteer programs need to charge a fee to help their program pay for itself and grow. After a lot of debate, we decided a one-time charge of \$50 was something most property owners would pay. It is actually good value considering the amount of time invested by the team (1 ½-2 hours of time on property) plus a sign and written report. We also made it a one-time fee and will revisit a property several times providing advice until it is certified. By asking for a fee, we are also asking the homeowners for some commitment to the visit and follow-up. Other programs offer a sliding scale with homeowners encouraged to pay an initial fee or more if they can afford it. We have developed different fee levels for HOAs and private schools, and offer some groups such as non-profits visits for no charge. These are the types of nuances that a program will need to determine as people become more engaged and want advice on creating better habitat.

The NHBA considers this program part of its conservation effort and supplements some of the expenditures. Besides increasing habitat for birds, the program has additional benefits including bringing in new members to NHBA and creating a community of people who are like-minded in creating habitat for birds, insects and other wildlife.

Defining Certified Bird Friendly Habitat

Our goal is to be encouraging and approachable; to give people a basic understanding that inspires action and further learning. The metrics are rooted in science, but we keep them reasonable for the average property owner. Each year our team debates the merits of each and we almost always tweak the requirements. We encourage you to develop requirements that work for your team, your community, and the local ecosystem. We offer the specifics of our program as a starting point. Each line item is discussed in detail in the following sections.

- ☐ **Certified.** Property meets or exceeds the following requirements:
 - ☐ Property has at least 30% coverage of native plants including some keystone species, and property owner plans to continue to add species.
 - ☐ High threat invasive plants cannot cover more than 15% of property, and property owner plans to keep them under control or to remove.
 - ☐ All vegetative layers including trees, shrubs, and the herbaceous layer are present or are in the planning stage as the size of property permits.
 - ☐ Leaves are left at the ground layer all year long where possible.
 - ☐ Mosquito sprays, rodenticides, and systemic insecticides like neonicotinoids are not used. Other pesticides are minimized.
 - ☐ At least four other wildlife habitat improvements are present:
 - ☐ No cats or cats kept indoors and in outdoor enclosures such as catios.
 - ☐ Windows protected with method to reduce bird-window collisions.
 - ☐ Outdoor security lighting either on motion sensors or turned off when not needed – not left on all night.
 - ☐ Variety of nectar and host plants blooming throughout growing season to support pollinators.
 - ☐ Pollinator and beneficial insect nesting habitats such as: snags, nurse logs, 1' to 2' of pithy stems left in garden during clean-up, and a spot of bare ground for native bee nests.
 - ☐ Lawn area with non-native turfgrass reduced to minimum needed.
 - ☐ Having a pond or well-maintained bird bath for water source.
- ☐ **Under Construction.** Property does not meet Certification requirements but landowners are actively working to improve habitat.
 - ☐ Property does not qualify yet for certification.
 - ☐ Property owner plans to add enough native plants to achieve certification.
 - ☐ Property owner plans to remove enough invasive plants to achieve certification.
 - ☐ All vegetative layers including trees, shrubs, and the herbaceous layer are present or are in the planning stage as the size of property permits.
 - ☐ Leaves are left at the ground layer all year long where possible.
 - ☐ Mosquito sprays, rodenticides, and systemic insecticides like neonicotinoids are not used. Other pesticides are minimized.
 - ☐ At least three other wildlife habitat improvements are present.

Native Plants: What Type and How Many?

Certification Requirement: Property has at least 30% coverage of native plants including some keystone species, and property owner plans to continue to add species.

First, “coverage” is defined by area from a birds’-eye, top down view of a property. This is an estimate only. The percent coverage considers only available habitat area and excludes buildings and hardscape. Thus, a 1-acre parcel with a house, driveway, and outbuilding on 25% of the property can still achieve 100% native plant coverage since we consider the built 25% as “unavailable”. Given the presence of vegetative layers, the percent coverage of native plus invasive plants can exceed 100% (e.g. native canopy trees with a ground layer of English ivy). This is a subjective estimate, but taking precise field or GIS measurements is prohibitively time consuming. The BFH team of two (plant expert and recorder) discuss their observations and together decide on a percentage estimate during the yard visit.

Initially our program had 3 levels of certification starting at 20%, but after several years of working with residential properties, we simplified to one level of certification at 30% and added an "under construction" category below that. This is very doable and creates buy-in from the landowner. Most landowners can easily meet this requirement with large canopy trees which is why we also included the requirement for vegetative layers. We want to encourage people to continue to improve their property.

Doug Tallamy has developed the concept of keystone species to describe the native plant genera that host the most insect biomass and thus are an essential foundation for the ecosystem. They also are the best food sources for songbird nestlings since they need to be fed insects to survive. The [National Wildlife Federation website](#) allows anyone to easily generate a list of the top keystone plant genera for their location. We recommend [watching the first 24 minutes of this video from Doug Tallamy](#) to better understand the important role of keystone plants. The presence of “some” keystone species is required for certification, and this is often achieved in our predominantly forested region.

Certification Requirement: All vegetative layers including trees, shrubs, and the herbaceous layer are present or are in the planning stage as the size of property permits.

In our predominantly forested area, vertical layers of vegetation are a regionally-appropriate driver of biodiversity. In order to reach certification status, a property must have native plants represented in each layer. Our program does not define exactly how many or a specific area that must be present and instead teams decide when a layer is reasonably represented. For example, 3 native shrubs on a 1 acre property would not qualify.

The presence of native plants in each layer is often the metric that properties are lacking if they do not reach certification on the first visit (usually it is a lack of shrubs).

Invasive plants: Rank and Area

Certification Requirement: Property has less than 15% coverage by area of high threat invasive species, and property owner plans to keep them under control or to remove them.

Through many years and debates, our team has decided that no more than 15% coverage by area of high threat invasive species is a reasonable, achievable goal for most property owners. Referencing the [NC Invasive Plant Council's ranked list of invasive species](#), we report invasive species in two categories: Severe or Significant Threat (Rank 1 and 2) and Lower Threat (Rank 3 and Watch List). Only the percent coverage of Severe or Significant Threat invasive species counts towards the invasive plant requirement. During the visit, our team makes every effort to identify all invasive species, share the threat level of each, and help the property owner prioritize the high threat species for removal. Our teams will tag invasive plants with tape so homeowners can later identify and remove them. We also encourage homeowners to take photos of the invasive plants for reference.

The invasive plant requirement is still one of the primary reasons property owners are not certified on their first visit. Many property owners are amazed at how many plants in their yard are invasive.

Other Habitat Features to Incorporate and Why

Below are habitat features that are less focused on vegetation. These items are excellent talking points and we review each one with the property owner during the visit.

Certification Requirement: Leaves are left at the ground layer all year long where possible.

In our forested area, we stress that leaves are nature's fertilizers and provide essential nutrients for the trees from which they fall! They also provide shelter for many insects during the winter months, in particular providing winter habitat for many pollinators and 94% of caterpillars—the two classes of insects we need most and are an essential part of an intact ecosystem supporting wildlife in this area. Leaving the leaves also helps reduce flooding, air, water and noise pollution and saves time and money.

Certification Requirement: Mosquito sprays, rodenticides, and systemic insecticides like neonicotinoids are not used. Other pesticides are minimized.

As we encourage the planting of native plants, it makes no sense to then hire a mosquito fogger, or to use broad spectrum lawn treatments on the property, the former killing all insects, including essential bird food, and the latter killing native groundcover. Rodenticides cruelly and painfully kill rodents, and birds of prey such as hawks and owls are at risk of suffering the same fate if they eat poisoned rodents. Systemic insecticides applied to plants are absorbed by all the plant tissue including even the nectar and pollen and are harmful to the beneficial insects using those plants.

Certification Requirement: At least four other wildlife habitat improvements are present:

- ☐ **No cats or cats kept indoors and in outdoor enclosures such as catios.**

The biggest threat to birds is habitat loss, but the second biggest is domestic cats. When allowed outdoors, they devastate populations not only of birds - an estimated 2.4 billion birds are killed by cats every year in the United States alone - but also of other small critters such as frogs, voles, and lizards. Domestic cats are an introduced species that have no place in our landscape.

- ☐ **Windows protected with method to reduce bird-window collisions.**

The [American Bird Conservancy](#) estimates that window collisions kill up to 1 billion birds each year. The victims are not limited to migratory species striking large glass buildings in cities. They include our local backyard birds as they fly back and forth. The American Bird Conservancy has tested some inexpensive deterrents and discusses them on their website. We often bring temporary glass marker pens to show a cheap, easy option to prevent window collisions. Window sticker companies have also sent us product samples and brochures to distribute.

- ☐ **Outdoor security lighting either on motion sensors or turned off when not needed – not left on all night.**

Bright outdoor lighting is a life-threatening hazard to birds that migrate at night, disorienting them and disrupting their sense of direction to the point of exhaustion and death. Outdoor lighting also devastates fireflies, moths, and other nocturnal animals.

- ☐ **Variety of nectar and host plants blooming throughout the growing season to support pollinators.**

Native plant variety is key to supporting diverse insects, which require different pollen and host plants at different times of the year.

- ☐ **Pollinator and beneficial insect nesting habitats such as: snags, nurse logs, 1' to 2' of pithy stems left in the garden during clean-up, and a spot of bare ground for native bee nests.**

In our forested area, snags, part of a dead or dying tree left standing, and nurse logs, a fallen tree or limb left lying on the ground can provide nesting habitat for birds and beneficial insects. Some wood nesting bees also use the soft wood of snags. Pithy stems left in the garden and bare soil sites both provide nesting sites for solitary native bees.

☐ **Lawn area with non-native turfgrass reduced to minimum needed.**

Lawns with the typical nonnative grasses such as fescue can require fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides, and frequent mowing, all of which are detrimental to wildlife and the environment. Grass lawns also produce few insects for birds. Creating natural areas with native plants and leaf mulch is a much better and lower maintenance alternative.

☐ **Having a pond or well-maintained bird bath for water source.**

Additional important suggestions to improve wildlife habitat also include:

- Wildlife is protected when doing routine maintenance, e.g., mower blades raised higher and not mowing in evening.
- Only organic fertilizer is used, if any.
- Nest boxes are present for brown headed nuthatches and/or bluebirds.
- Electric-powered mowers, blowers, and string trimmers are used instead of gas.
- No basement window wells present, or guards have been put on basement window wells so that frogs and toads don't get trapped and die.



Tufted Titmouse enjoying a water feature (photo by Barbara Driscoll).

Scheduling Visits

Who is on the Team

The Bird Friendly Habitat Certification committee is made up of four important positions: Program Coordinators, Schedulers, Recorders, and Plant Experts. One or more Program Coordinators help to organize the program. Schedulers are responsible for coordinating site visits between the team and the property owner(s). A site visit team consists of one Recorder and one Plant Expert who work together to conduct a site visit, assessing the property for bird friendly habitat following the report template. The Plant Expert is responsible for identifying plant species and communicating with the Recorder as well as the property owner(s), who joins the team during the site visit. The Recorder is responsible for taking notes throughout the visit and writing a draft report within 1 week of the visit, generally. The Plant Expert reviews and edits the report, then the Recorder sends the final report to the property owner(s).

Outreach and scheduling

Welcome Letters: Scheduler(s) will be notified when a property owner submits a request (via [Google Form](#)) for a BFH visit. Scheduler then sends a welcome email that includes a letter with details of the visit and a copy of the BFH brochure. Welcome emails are tailored to describe when the property owner can expect their visit. Visit request forms received during the late fall, winter and early spring provide the start date for yard visits. Once the season is underway, we make a guesstimate timeframe for their visit based on the length of the waiting list. The response spreadsheet created by the Google Form contains the details the property owner provides (address, contact info, size of property, description of property, preferred visit days/times, and any questions they might have). Participants can pay the \$50 donation ahead of time via our website (Paypal, credit card) or pay with cash or check during the visit.

Scheduling (Volunteer Availability): Bird Friendly Habitat Certification visits take place during the growing season, typically May through early November. During this time, the scheduler volunteer(s) will send out a request for all Plant Experts and Recorders to fill out availability on a [Google Sheet](#), roughly every 3 weeks. Volunteers commit to 2-hour blocks of time and are expected to be available for visits during all time periods they sign up for. Schedulers coordinate teams of one Plant Expert and one Recorder using this availability and will schedule visits with property owners. Volunteers can sign up for as many slots as they would like during each 3-week period. Volunteers can share general preferences with the schedulers (e.g. weekends only, no more than 1 visit per week, or 2 visits per week but not back-to-back, etc.) who do their best to schedule accordingly.

Scheduling (Property Owner Availability): Working through the list of form submissions in the order in which they are received, the Scheduler checks the property owner's availability for the coming three weeks of the schedule. We have found that both email and text are often necessary to establish contact with the property owner due to emails potentially ending up in spam folders. When there is a match between property owner and team availability, the

scheduler emails the team with the visit location and asks to confirm their availability. After the team confirms, the scheduler emails the property owner(s) and the team to confirm the final visit details. That email will also contain reference documents for the property owner(s) to review before the visit. If an appointment needs to be rescheduled, the Scheduler will work with the property owner to find a new day/time and a match with an available team. Scheduled visits are recorded on the [Visit Calendar](#) spreadsheet.

Tracking: For the sake of efficiency, the scheduler will be reaching out to multiple property owners who are ready to be scheduled by virtue of reaching the top of the list and whose preference for day/time matches up with volunteer availability. There will be property owners who will be slow to respond or never respond, those who will respond promptly, and those who supply further details related to their availability. It is helpful to have a system for tracking the progress of scheduling a visit from notifying the property owner they are next in line, receiving or not receiving a response, determining the date and time of the visit, confirming with the team, and sending the confirmation email to the property owner. This can be done with a separate [Scheduling Tracker](#) spreadsheet or incorporated into the spreadsheet that houses the form submissions.

Team Communication: When the Scheduler is notified that a property owner has paid for their BFH visit via the NHBA website prior to the visit, the Scheduler notifies the Plant Recorder so that they know not to ask for payment at the visit.

Record Keeping: The Scheduler updates the spreadsheet of submitted forms in the columns to track the stages in the process of scheduling as well as the final details of team, date of visit, Certification status, and online payment.

Conducting A Site Visit

Protocols

A site visit consists of one Plant Expert and one Recorder (“the team”) walking a representative sample of the property and identifying (at a minimum) the most common native and invasive species. The property owner(s) join the team throughout the site visit, making it an interactive and educational experience. The Plant Expert will identify plants aloud, preferably using the common name to be more accessible to a wide variety of property owner(s). The Plant Expert is responsible for identifying and communicating key plants in each vegetative layer to the Recorder, who will record notes during the visit. Both the common and scientific name may be shared at this time, or can be researched later for the written report. The Recorder may use a [blank report template](#) to record notes. The team also looks for the habitat elements described in the report template and leads a discussion of key observations. The team decides before they leave the property whether or not to give “Under Construction” or “Certified” status and explains actions that the property owner(s) can take to improve habitat quality.



The team walks each property with the property owner(s).

Reports

Written reports are provided to the property owner after the visit. These written reports allow the property owner to fully engage during the visit (instead of scrambling to write notes) and provide a document that they can refer back to at any time. Recorders take notes during the visit using the [BFHC Site Visit: Recording Form \(Template\)](#). After the visit, Recorders write up the report for the property owner using the [BFHC Site Visit: Writeup Form \(Template\)](#). Here is an [example report](#).

Reports follow a simple standard report format:

- The date and property owner information (name, address, phone number, email address) is all available from the scheduling communications.
- Native plants are recorded, with common and scientific name, using the site report notes. Mistakes and typos have been reduced by having a reference list ([word](#), [excel](#)) of regularly encountered native species available to the team.

- Invasive species are recorded, with common and scientific name, using the site report notes. A list of local, commonly encountered species has been developed for use by the team (see above plant list documents).
- A simple property description is an opportunity to put the plant communities noted in context; size of property, ground cover, lawn size, etc.
- The site visit team will have determined if the property is “Certified” or “Under Construction”. As part of this determination they will have discussed the proportion of the property covered by native and invasive plants.
- The checklist of wildlife habitat improvements is filled out, and serves as a flag for topics that may be included in the recommendations section.
- The recommendations section is arguably the most important communication with the property owner as they strive for certification. Recommendations are given to improve the property as a BFH, usually under prioritized topics, eg. Removing invasives, or increasing the shrub layer.
- The broader BFH team has developed short paragraphs on specific topics, eg. Tallamy research, window strikes, water features, bird boxes, which can be copied and pasted as appropriate in the report.
- The standard report format includes a number of key resources as links, which precludes the need for them to be written into the report and allows them to be kept up to date.

Signage

Signage is an important part of the program as it acknowledges work done by property owners, advertises your program, and informs neighbors. We have found that it should be readable from a distance of at least 10 feet so that people passing can easily read it. In some instances, property owners want the signs to inform their neighbors that they have something other than turf for a reason or are leaving their leaves on the property to help wildlife. We offer two yard signs (blank templates available, QR codes can be added):



Under Construction: Educational purpose, with text explaining that the property owner is working to make improvements as part of their participation in the BFH Program. QR code to learn more.	Certified: Meant to be a long-term, permanent symbol.
Rectangular 18" high by 12 " wide	Oval 9" high by 14" wide
\$7 per sign including stakes	\$20 per sign
3/16" Corrugated Plastic printed on one side	Aluminum composite called MaxMetal printed on one side with UV resistance coating

Follow-up

After the visit, the Recorder writes a draft report using the [report writeup template](#). The Plant Expert then reviews and edits the draft to make sure the species list is complete and contains botanic names, and adds any comments or resources to help the property owner(s) improve habitat. The Recorder sends the final report as a pdf to the property owner(s) and Bcc's the Bird Friendly Habitat Committee*. Occasionally the property owner(s) will email with questions and either team member can respond with advice.

*Our team uses a [Google Group](#) to save a repository of yard reports and serve as an email archive. This information is always accessible to members of the Google Group, even when members leave or you delete an email from your personal account. This also helps when a property owner requests a second visit, the report can be shared with the second visit team to inform them of what was lacking on the initial visit.



Maria of Carrboro proudly displays her Under Construction Sign.

Recruiting and Partners

Whether your program is all volunteer or you have some staff for site visits, reports and scheduling, you will need to keep recruiting new volunteers to implement the program. Looking towards other groups that have people with an interest in conservation and nature is particularly helpful. Some potential groups to reach out to include Master Gardeners, Master Naturalist, garden clubs and local native plant societies. In our state, North Carolina, each county has an agricultural extension agent who works with Master Gardeners. Reaching out to these contacts can help to generate volunteers. Cape Fear Audubon's Nature at Home program was developed as a partnership with the Extension Master Gardeners. Master Gardener and similar programs typically have volunteer hour requirements which can be met by assisting with bird friendly programs.

Generally, a number of bird watchers are also interested in other aspects of nature including plants and this is a very good place to look for new recruits. Many of our volunteers are backyard bird enthusiasts who are also interested in conservation and improving habitat for birds. We are also fortunate to have a number of universities and botanical gardens which add to the pool of potential candidates interested in helping with bird friendly programs. One of our best recruiting tools for new volunteers are actual BFH property owners who have improved their own habitats and enjoy the learning experience of seeing other yards.

Other partners who help with outreach include botanical gardens and garden outlet stores. Many nurseries who sell native plants are eager for programs such as this to generate interest among property owners in purchasing plants. Tabling at local plant sales also promotes the program and helps with recruiting team members. Garden clubs also are interested in speakers and will ask for a presentation which generates requests for certification and also potential team member interest.

Training New Recruits: New plant experts and plant recorders receive training by shadowing on scheduled visits. The number of visits they accompany is left up to the trainee, but we recommend that at least three visits are necessary to get a sense of the variety of styles among plant experts and of types of yards they will encounter (very small urban, suburban development, large rural, etc.). For plant recorder trainees, the final step is to write up the report for the visit and share it with the mentoring plant recorder for feedback. We also offer the opportunity to receive hands-on training in terms of navigating the Google Drive where essential documents are kept and steps required for producing and sharing the final yard report. We encourage members to take classes on plant identification offered through local sources and will often pay for these classes when they are specifically related to knowledge of native plants or invasive plants.

Outreach and Communication



Left. Volunteers from NHBA and the NC Native Plant Society engage visitors at the NC State Fair with the Native vs. Invasive Plants game – a real hit!

Getting the Word Out

With all the changes in social media, emails, newsletters and websites, there are a number of ways to engage the public and publicize your program. Check out our [BFH certification program homepage](#) to see how we present the program information. In the last few years, we have been tracking on our intake forms how people heard about our program. Primary ways are: website, from a neighbor, presentation, chapter email or program, signage, tabling event, and local garden center.

- Website information - From the beginning of your program, you will probably want to create some form of website to include information for your local audience about your program. Initially, this can be fairly simple information about the overall program and how property owners can sign up for visits. As your program grows, you may want to provide more information. For example, we have created pages the following informational pages primarily based on input from property owners needs and wants:
 - Native Plants - includes why native plants are important and lists of plants local to the region that are found in the native plant trade.
 - Invasive Plants - What are invasive plants and how to remove them.

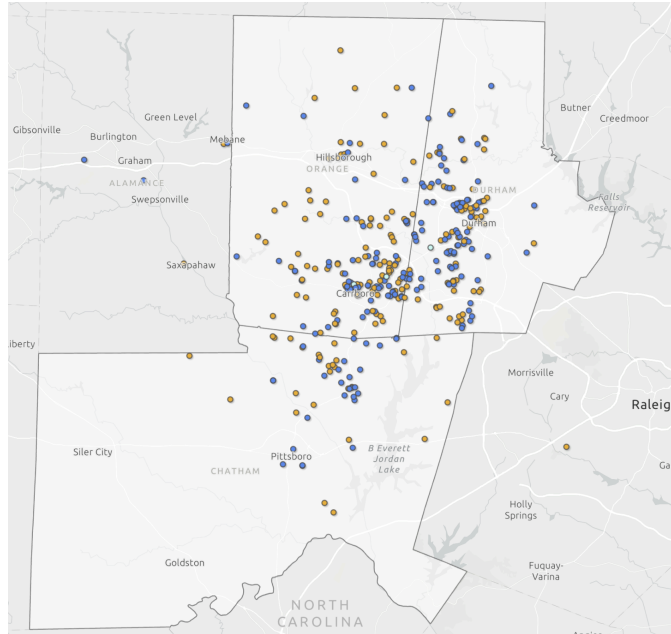
- Information or references to helpful tools on managing native landscapes.
- Native Plant nurseries, landscapers and designers - lists for property owners use. You may want to reference [National Audubon's Native Plants Database](#) for recommended nurseries from across the country.
- Information on how to make your landscape safer and more bird friendly.
- Leave Your Leaves - information on the many ways this helps the environment.
- Social Media and Publicity - Facebook, Instagram, Email blasts to members are all ways to get the word out about your program and have people sign up for habitat visits.
- Signage - From the beginning of our program it was important to us and property owners to acknowledge their work and advertise the program. Signage helps to inform the neighbors about creating better habitat and starting a conversation on what that means.
- Presentations - garden clubs, nurseries, botanical gardens, libraries, local environmental groups.
- Word of Mouth - Neighbor to neighbor.
- Tabling at Events.

BFH Newsletter

The BFH property owners are viewed as a specific community and a [Bird Friendly Habitat Newsletter](#) has been developed for this audience. The Newsletter is published each month during the site visiting season (April - October), and aims to share BFH community successes and educational content. In each newsletter, the aim is to spotlight new BFH certified property owners, sharing photos of their garden elements and their stories. A native plant of the month is highlighted for educational purposes, as is a local invasive species. Information about topical local events and presentations are also shared.

Mapping Impact

In an effort to quantify and share the impact of the BFH program, we have developed an online [GIS map](#) using property owner addresses. Linking to local government databases also enables an estimate of acreage impacted and a visual display of connectivity. These are seen as key metrics to share with the BFH community to encourage them to work further in their neighborhoods. We used ArcGIS Online to create our online map, with access from National Audubon. If you are part of an Audubon chapter, National Audubon staff can assist you with mapping needs. Mapping your participant properties easily shows your program's impact!



Map of NHBA's BFH Program Impact 2024

Native Plant Swap

NHBA has hosted two fall Native Plant Swap events in an effort to have native plant materials more readily available to property owners, and also to build the BFH community with repeat in person meetings. Event attendees are encouraged to bring native plant transplants from their garden and/or take home the donated plants. Attendees do not have to bring plants to participate. Each year we have many extra plants at the end, so everyone goes home with a trunkload. Some organizations also grow and sell native plants, but this is currently beyond our capability. Other organizations have partnered with native plant nurseries and local botanic gardens to sell native plants.



We used a free Canva account to create a simple graphic for use in our newsletters and on social media.

Example Documents

[BFHC Brochure: Program \(Template\)](#)

[BFHC Brochure: Program \(Template\).pdf](#)

[BFHC Brochure: Native Plants - English \(NHBA\).pdf](#)

[BFHC Brochure: Native Plants - Spanish \(NHBA\)](#)

[BFHC List: Recommended Native Plants List \(Template\)](#)

[BFHC List: Recommended Native Plants List \(NHBA\).pdf](#)

[BFHC List: Keystone Genera for NC Piedmont](#)

[BFHC List: Plant Names Common - Scientific Word Version](#)

[BFHC List: Plant Names Common - Scientific Excel Version](#)

[BFHC Site Visit: Property Owners Form \(Template\)](#)

[BFHC Site Visit: Recording Form \(Template\)](#)

[BFHC Site Visit: Report Example](#)

[BFHC Site Visit: Writeup Form \(Template\)](#)

[BFHC Job Description: Plant Expert](#)

[BFHC Job Description: Recorder](#)

[BFHC Job Description: Scheduler](#)

[BFHC: Scheduling - Availability How To Guide](#)

[BFHC: Scheduling - Tracker \(Template\)](#)

[BFHC: Scheduling - Visit Calendar \(Template\)](#)

[BFHC: Scheduling - Volunteer Availability](#)

[BFHC Sign: Certification \(NHBA Example\)](#)

[BFHC Sign: Under Construction.png \(NHBA Example\)](#)

[BFHC Sign: Under Construction Sign.pptx \(Template\)](#)

Resources

Some of these resources will be more North Carolina centric, but all apply generally and provide examples of what might be resourced locally. These are helpful references to share with new team members and in the reports to property owners.

Doug Tallamy

- Tallamy, D.W., 2007. Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants.
- Tallamy, D.W., 2019. Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Yard.
- Tallamy, D.W., 2021. The Nature of Oaks: The Rich Ecology of Our Most Essential Native Trees.
- We recommended watching the first 24 minutes of this video from Doug Tallamy on the important role of keystone plants.
<https://www.nwf.org/Garden-for-Wildlife/About/Resources/native-keystone-plants>

Leave The Leaves

- NHBA - [Leave Your Leaves Program](#)
- Xerces Society [Leave the Leaves: Winter Habitat Protection](#)
- Keep Durham Beautiful - [Leave Your Leaves Resources](#)

Herbicides and Insecticides

- NHBA blog article - [The Invasion of the Asian Tigers](#)
- NHBA blog article - [Neonics, Bee-Killing Insecticides that also Harm Birds.](#)
- North Virginia Bird Alliance - [How to Set Up a Mosquito Larva Trap](#)
- American Bird Conservancy - [Take Flight From Lawn Pesticides: Tips for Organic, Bird-Friendly Gardening](#)

Cats

- NHBA blog article - [Living with Cats and Birds](#)
- American Bird Conservancy - [Safe Solutions for Pet Cats + Catio Options](#)

Window strikes

- American Bird Conservancy - [Preventing Bird Window Strikes](#)
- American Bird Conservancy - [Recommendations to make windows more visible](#)
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology's article - [Why Birds Hit Windows](#)
- NHAS blog article - [Preventing that Dreaded Thump](#)

Outdoor security lighting

- Dark Sky International - [What is light pollution? | DarkSky International](#)
- Dark Sky International - [Outdoor lighting at night doesn't do what you think it does to reduce crime and increase safety](#)

Native Plants Throughout the Seasons

- NC Botanical Garden - [Creating Your Pollinator Garden](#) (.pdf file)
- NHBA blog article - [Your Yard Is Your Pollinator Garden](#)
- NHBA blog article - [To Every Plant There is a Season](#)
- NHBA blog article - [Creating a Pollinator Friendly Yard for more information](#)
- National Wildlife Federation native plant finder - nativeplantfinder.nwf.org
- National Audubon Society native plant database - [Native Plants | Audubon](#)
- NC Native Plant Society - [Recommended Native Species](#)

Invasive plant species

- NC Invasive Plant Council - <https://nc-ipc.weebly.com/>
- The NC Invasive Plants Council [Shun List](#) of plants that are being sold in retail garden centers that you should not buy because they are invasive.
- US Department of Agriculture - [Invasive species Profiles List](#)

Cultivars

- Martin, Susan, July 2020-Vol 6 No. 7, [Native Species or Cultivars of Native Plants – Does it Matter?](#)
- Baisden, E. C., Tallamy, D. W., Narango, D. L., & Boyle, E. (2018). Do Cultivars of Native Plants Support Insect Herbivores?. *HortTechnology hortte*, 28(5), 596-606. Retrieved Feb 5, 2025, from <https://doi.org/10.21273/HORTTECH03957-18>

Bird Houses

- Cornell Lab of Ornithology NestWatch - [safe birdhouse construction](#)
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology NestWatch - [the right bird. right house](#)
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology NestWatch - [tips on placement](#)