Less work is more fun by converting garden to wildlife habitat

I have come to love February, and not for Punxsutawney Phil’s promise of the eventual arrival of spring. Each February, the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture holds its yearly “Farming for the Future” conference in State College.

Hundreds of farmers, gardeners and consumers come from all corners of the state and beyond to share ideas on creating more sustainable food systems and communities.

This year, one of the workshops I attended was titled “Converting Your Lawn to Natural Habitat,” presented by Margaret Brittingham of Penn State and Dale Hendricks of North Creek Nurseries in Chester County.

They sent their audience home with a solid understanding of the principles of creating a veritable wildlife refuge out of our own backyards.

As if getting out of mowing the lawn isn’t motivation enough, there is no shortage of reasons why naturalizing our yards makes sense.

Converting our perfectly manicured lawns to natural habitats reduces the amount of energy, pollution and fertilizers that go into lawn maintenance. A deep-rooted landscape absorbs rainwater, while a grass lawn allows a majority of it to run off. Grass lawns provide little in the way of biodiversity, but a natural habitat can support an endless number of species. Brittingham and Hendricks identified four principles to keep in mind when designing your natural habitat: Food, cover, water and spatial relationships.

Kristen Develin is a Master Gardener who lives and gardens in Lemont.

For answers to your gardening questions, contact Master Gardeners by e-mail at centreed@psu.edu

Food

Providing food for wildlife doesn’t mean giving the groundhogs free access to your vegetable patch. Many beautiful species of trees and shrubs provide food for birds. Choose food plants and trees that will bear fruit at different times. Having food available to birds year-round ensures that you’ll have birds making your yard their home year-round.

Serviceberry yields fruits in June or July. Sumac or hawthorne, Brittingham explained, are not especially favored by birds, therefore making an excellent emergency food source in the winter when there is little else available for the birds. Other fruit-bearing trees and plants include cherry, elderberry, mountain ash, beech, oak, raspberries and blackberries. Keep bird feeders well stocked to ensure that your bird population will be fed when the landscape is not meeting their food needs.

When landscaping for butterflies and hummingbirds, be sure to incorporate nectar producing plants such as columbine, bee balm, phlox, lavender, butterfly bush and heliotrope. To maintain butterfly populations, include plants that caterpillars love, such as milkweed, butterfly weed, sassafras, spice bush and cherry willow.

Cover

Providing a place for birds and other animals to nest and avoid predators is crucial to maintaining biodiversity in your yard for the long term. Evergreens and branches provide year-round protection for birds and small mammals, while well-placed nesting boxes will invite bluebirds and tree swallows. Brush piles, rock piles and old logs will also provide cover for small animals.

Water

Since all creatures need to drink, having water available to them guarantees you’ll have visitors to your yard. Bird baths serve birds, insects and larger mammals. A fountain placed at ground level will quench the thirst of a wide variety of creatures. A small pond will draw the biggest crowd, and may even provide shelter for frogs and turtles.

Spatial relationships

When planning your natural habitat, choose plants for a variety of heights. This will provide for a greater number and diversity of animal species that your yard can support. Plantings should be grouped in islands of varying heights and colors rather than in isolation. For example, wildflowers, ferns and hostas can be planted under the canopy of a large tree for visual appeal and to provide food and cover for a variety of animal life.

Converting your yard to a more natural habitat will reduce your negative impact on groundwater and air quality, will support wildlife that is increasingly losing its habitat to development, and will provide you with a beautiful backyard retreat. And with less lawn to mow, you’ll have more time to enjoy it.