

PROJECT WILDLIFE: BISBEE

By Jane Gaffer

Those of you who have been following this column will know that a group of us got together some time back to discuss the possibility of getting the City of Bisbee registered as a Community Wildlife Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation. Earlier this month to our delight, the City Council announced their unanimous support for the project so we now ask you to stay tuned and keep watching as we start work on the northern section of Warren's Vista Park. More than that, don't just watch ... join in! Contact plantnativeinbisbee@gmail.com and one of us will get in touch with you to see where and with what you would like to help.

This project is such fun ... and it's so important.

A few facts: birds, bees, butterflies etc are not just beautiful and fun to watch. They are pollinators, vital for plant and crop reproduction, and they are presently under stress throughout the country, to a great extent due to loss of habitat. (More than a million acres of urban and suburban land are developed each year.) The good news is that within cities and suburbs, private yards on average make up about 50% of green space. Imagine! If these yards are planted mindfully Bisbee could, instead of displacing small critters, actually cater to them!

A few more facts: native plants are usually superior: they are adapted to our climate and local wildlife grew up with them and are attracted to them over and above introduced varieties. Be aware that barely 14% of plants sold in nurseries are natives. (I love to think of the difference we could make by asking, each time we visit a nursery, to be shown to the 'native section'. You have to think that if enough of us did that, they would start stocking more of them!)

Some tips on how to garden for wildlife. Instead of manicured lawns, we should start to embrace native grasses and create wildflower meadows. As Val Morrill (Arizona Wildlife Federation Board Member) has said, "Within reason and the tolerance of your neighbors, the general rule is "messy is better than manicured." (Apparently, to most critters, expanses of lawns and hardscape can seem as inhospitable as moonscapes!). We should of course garden organically and get rid of chemicals and pesticides . They are bad for critters and humans alike.

More tips. We should not look at things with our human eyes: if you are a cactus wren, a cholla looks like a wonderful place to nest; prickly pears represent home to mourning doves; fallen leaves and wood clippings provide cover for bugs while a pile of rocks does the same for lizards.

And more. A knowledgeable neighbor advises that if you are starting from scratch, you should plant shrubs first for essential cover before going for color with annuals and perennials: "They will come by themselves" he claims and my own experience proves him right: half of the small and colorful wildflowers, not to mention the very substantial lovely silver-grey senecio and the

astonishingly yellow blazing star, all of which have arrived in my garden over the last three years, have come by themselves. No help needed from me.

In addition to being such fun and so important, this is so interesting ...

Did you know that in addition to dragonflies there are damselflies and bee flies? ... and that hummingbirds have great memories? (They can remember not only yards they visited in the past but where a particular feeder was hung, which plants had the best nectar and how long each flower took to generate new fuel.) And that some species don't need open water? (Many desert insects, lizards and snakes, even some birds and mammals, get all the water they need from the food they eat) ... I admit, I had no idea!

Such fun, so important, so interesting ... and so easy!

In the words of the National Wildlife Federation: If you haven't certified your garden yet: do it! If you have, encourage a neighbor. (Better still, talk to many neighbors.) You can certify your garden online at www.nwf.org/certifiedwildlifehabitat. When you've done it, do let us know at plantnativeinbisbee@gmail.com. And thank you!

I find I can't end this column without sharing two favorite anecdotes. One person says that when she comes home from a day at work, she goes into her garden, sits down and watches hummingbirds at the salvias she herself has planted. She loves the thought that she has provided them with their food. The second quote comes from a friend who corrected me when I wrote to her that the bees at one of my prickly pears were clearly getting drunk: they appeared to be having difficulty making their way out of one blossom only to fly into the next. She wrote back that these blossoms were "thigmotropic", meaning that their stamens closed over the bees so that they had to struggle out, covered with more pollen than would otherwise be the case. My friend ended her email with the words "May we all have the time and the patience to watch bees dance." Hear, hear!