



Backyard Conservation

Conserving with Nature in Your Yard

VOLUME 1
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IN THIS ISSUE:

- 01 Start Composting this Year
- 01 Prepare Your Bird Houses
- 02 Ready to Get Outdoors?
- 02 Late Winter Pruning
- 03 Invasive of the Issue
- 04 Greening a Drought Damaged Yard



SPRING EVENTS

04/21/11—Basic Tree Care Workshop, 6:30 p.m. Avon-Washington Twp. Public Library, 498 N. SR 267, Avon, IN 46123
Phone: (317) 272-4818

05/21/11—Invasive Plants: Learn Them, Then Get Rid of Them, 9:00 a.m., Bray Family Homestead Park in Noblesville.
RSVP to Tina Moon at tina.moon@hamiltoncounty.in.gov or 317-773-2181.



Tell us what you know about invasives in your community—take our on-line survey at: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/5X25ZN3>

START COMPOSTING THIS YEAR

Shaena Reinhart, Hamilton County SWCD

Think You're Green? Not If You Don't Compost! These days, everyone is trying to be "green". We recycle, use cloth shopping bags, and buy organic food. Yet we are still sending a tremendous amount of waste to the landfill *and* purchasing newly processed soil amendments and fertilizers to use on our lawns and gardens (which come wrapped in packaging...which gets thrown away...see my point?). Enter composting. If you have always thought that composting was too much work or too smelly, maybe it is time to reconsider this backyard conservation practice!



Finished compost.

The amount of work required to compost depends on whether you choose to "cold compost" or "hot compost". Cold composting is simply piling organic yard and kitchen debris (weeds broken into 8-inch or smaller pieces, leaves, fruit peels, egg shells...) in a heap on the ground. It is very easy, but also a slow process. No specific amount of material is needed to start the compost heap, and you can add to the pile at anytime. Some studies have shown that because of the low temperatures achieved during decomposition, weed seeds and disease causing organisms may not be destroyed, which can be a problem when you spread the finished product around your garden or flower bed.

Hot composting causes the material to decompose faster. It also has the benefits of destroying many weed seeds and disease organisms. For hot composting, a pile with minimum dimensions of 3' x 3' x 3' is needed for efficient heating. Mix together or alternate layers of green materials such as grass clippings and brown materials such as dead leaves. Green materials provide a source of nitrogen while brown materials provide carbon for the decomposing organisms. If you are lacking in nitrogen (green materials), a small amount of nitrogen fertilizer or barnyard manure can be added. Do not compost pet manure that can contain diseases or meat scraps that can attract unwanted insects or wildlife. Moisture and aeration are required for hot composting. You will want to keep the pile moist, but not wet. Soggy piles encourage the growth of organisms that can survive without oxygen and cause unpleasant odors. Provide aeration either by turning the pile or by using bins that allow air to enter the pile.



Tumbling composter available from many SWCDs.

Many styles of compost bins are on the market that will help contain the pile and hasten the process. Some resemble garbage cans. The new material is placed in the top and the finished compost can be scooped out of the bottom. Other bins are cylindrical and as you roll the bin, the compost is mixed and aerated. Several Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) are now selling composters, so be sure to check with them before heading to your local garden center! You can also build a simple bin. A hoop of wire mesh will contain the waste and allow air to enter from all sides. Wooden bins also can be built—numerous plans are available from nurseries or garden centers. Check on local regulations before building a compost bin. Lastly, realize that composting is not an exact science. The rate of decomposition will vary depending on weather conditions and materials composted. Finished compost will be pleasant smelling and crumbly to the touch. It can be used in any garden and will provide nutrients for plants and help improve the structure of the soil. Not to mention that you no longer have so much trash to carry to the curb! Now *that's* a green idea.

PREPARING YOUR BIRD HOUSES FOR SPRING

Travis Stoelting, Habitat Programs Director, Indiana Wildlife Federation

The arrival of spring is a much anticipated event for bird enthusiasts and backyard conservationists alike. With every week that goes by, we enjoy once again seeing the species we have come to associate with warmer weather. As the spring season advances, many of the species that you will observe are looking for an area to establish a breeding territory. Cavity nesters such as Eastern Bluebirds, House Wrens, Carolina Chickadees, and Tree Swallows will specifically be in search of an appropriate place to raise their

young. In your backyard, the perfect spot may be your bird house.

To accommodate birds and provide the optimal conditions for a successful nesting season, there are a few things you need to do in preparation. The first warm day in February should be your cue to start performing the required maintenance of your nesting boxes. Start by removing all of the old nest material from the box. All natural materials such as feathers, twigs, and grass can be simply thrown out, while man-made materials such as plastic, cloth, and monofilament should be thrown out.

Your next step will be to clean the box. This can be done by first brushing all surfaces with a dry wire brush to remove

READY TO GET OUTDOORS? CONSIDER HOW YOU CAN HELP RESTORE HEALTHY RIVER COMMUNITIES.

Marija Watson, Project Manager, Indiana Wildlife Federation

Before long, seasons will change once again. But during the remaining weeks of winter, use deicing materials cautiously. What you put on any surface near your home, from your driveway to your yard, affects water quality. The active chemicals found in these products can be harmful to turf grass, and salt can contaminate lakes and rivers by dissolving into soil and reaching aquifers. Sand and cat litter are good alternatives to salt.

Excess nutrients also lead to water problems. Pet waste contains high concentrations of nutrients that contribute to algal blooms in streams and creeks. Make sure to dispose of waste properly. If you choose to fertilize once the snow melts, test your soil's nutrient levels—if it has enough phosphorus, use a phosphorus-free fertilizer, or avoid fertilizer altogether. Instead of fertilizing, you can recycle any grass clippings or leaves as mulch. This organic material already contains nutrients that can be degraded by the microbes and replenish the soil. Rich soil absorbs and filters precipitation. Keep in mind, the best time to fertilize is during the fall. For helpful advice, visit www.indianawildlife.org/phosphorus.htm.

The Indiana Wildlife Federation's partner Clear Choices, Clean Water is a strategic project to inform and raise awareness on the connection between lawn care practices and the adverse impacts on Indiana's lakes and streams. Special emphasis has been placed on changing to phosphorus-free lawn fertilizer for mature turf grass. Please become involved by signing the Clear Choices, Clean Water Pledge to be phosphorus-free and joining the IWF team online at <http://www.clearchoicescleanwater.org/>.

IWF's proposed phosphorus-free legislation has been introduced for this year's session. Representative Dodge is the author for House Bill 1425 that restricts the use of phosphorus-enriched fertilizer on nonagricultural land. Senator Kruse is also working on phosphorus-free lawn care. Senate Bill 0118 permits a political subdivision to regulate the use of fertilizer if it contains phosphorus and is intended for lawn care. See details at <http://www.in.gov/legislative/index.htm>. To get involved and stay informed, join IWF at www.indianawildlife.org or call 317.875.9453.



Photo courtesy Indiana Wildlife Foundation

LATE WINTER PRUNING

Beth Alexander, Hamilton County Master Gardners

Late winter is a great time to take a good look at the structure of your trees and shrubs. You get to see the branches and overall shape of the trees and shrubs without the leaves masking what is really going on with your plants. So when we get the first warm days of the winter season in late March to mid April, grab your pruners and go out into your yard!

Start by getting to know what specific trees and shrubs that you have so that you know what their growth habits and overall shapes are suppose to be before you start to prune. You want to be sure to prune the tree or shrub into the shape that it would naturally grow. Once you know what type of trees and shrubs you are dealing with, you can now take your by-pass hand pruners, loppers or trees saws to your plants. By-pass pruners allow for a cleaner cut and won't damage the branch while cutting. Be sure to have your pruners sharpened before you begin pruning.

When looking at the tree or shrub, first determine if there are any dead or damaged branches that need to be removed. Then check for branches that are crossing. Trim the branches that are crossing back to the main branch or the nearest lateral branch. Trim the branch that is crossing, be sure to leave the branch collar intact to allow the tree or shrub to adequately repair and heal itself. If the branch is young or the cut is at a lateral branch, be sure to prune as close as possible to the junction point. There will more than likely not be a branch collar in young trees or lateral branch points.

This is also a perfect time to remove the branches that are considered suckers. Suckers are not only the branches that grow around the base of the tree—like you see around many crabapples—but they are also very straight branches that extend from a main branch and grow towards the top of the tree. These branches also have a completely different color and texture bark than the rest of the tree or shrub which will make these very easy to spot.

Remove any branches that grow towards the center of the tree or shrub that point toward the ground. These branches will only grow into problem areas for the tree in the years to come. For example, the branches growing toward the center of the tree will ultimately grow large enough to cause rubbing/damage on other branches that you want to keep.

After this pruning has been done, once again take a look at the remaining structure. Don't be shy about pruning the rest of the tree or shrub. This is where you will prune back branches to return the tree or shrub to its natural shape. Trim these branches back to at least the nearest lateral bud or lateral branch. In some cases, the branch may be cut back to a main branch or the trunk itself.

You can prune back the tree or shrub to 1/3 the overall height and width. If you have shrubs that have a tendency to grow quickly, you not only can remove 1/3 the overall height and width, but also remove up to 1/3 of the older growth from the center. This will allow for better air circulation in the plant and encourage new growth in the area. For example, forsythias and lilacs take very well to this type of pruning.

A great website that you can practice pruning techniques before trying it on your own: www.arbroday.org/trees/pruning

INVASIVE OF THE ISSUE: EXOTIC PLANT INVASIVES

Bob Eddleman, Plant A Million Director



WHAT IS AN INVASIVE SPECIES?

An invasive species is a non-native species (including seeds, eggs, spores, or other propagules) whose introduction causes or is likely to cause economic harm, environmental harm, or harm to human health. The term "invasive" is used for the most aggressive species. These species grow and reproduce rapidly, causing major disturbance to the areas in which they are present.

THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT INVASIVE SPECIES:

- Invasive species, if left uncontrolled, can and will limit land use now and into the future.
- The longer we ignore the problem, the harder and more expensive the battle for control will become.
- Invasive species can decrease your ability to enjoy hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, boating and other outdoor recreational activities.
- The United States suffers \$138 billion per year in economic losses due to exotic, invasive species.

JAPANESE BARBERRY

Native to Japan, Japanese barberry was brought to North America in the late nineteenth century. It quickly became popular for ornamental hedges as it is an attractive plant with its yellow flowers in the spring, brilliant fall coloring, and small, oblong red berries in the winter. It was also easy to cultivate; maybe too easy. As its fruits are often eaten by birds, the plant has easily naturalized and has established colonies outside cultivation that grows thick and crowds out native plants. Japanese barberry is not as common as some of the other invasive plants in Indiana but is becoming a real concern widespread use in landscaping. The Nature Conservancy calls it a "Plant Bully."

Japanese barberry may be confused with American barberry (*Berberis canadensis*), the only native species of barberry in North America, and common or European barberry (*Berberis vulgaris*) which is an introduced, sometimes invasive plant.

Japanese barberry spreads by seed and by vegetative expansion. It produces large numbers of seeds which have a high germination rate, estimated as high as 90%. Barberry seed is transported to new locations with the help of birds and small mammals which eat it. Birds frequently disperse seed while perched on powerlines or on trees at forest edges. Vegetative spread is through branches touching the ground that can root to form new plants and root fragments remaining in the soil that can sprout to form new plants.

MANAGEMENT OPTIONS

Do not plant Japanese barberry. Because it is a prolific seed-producer with a high germination rate, prevention of seed production should be a management priority. Since barberry can resprout from root fragments remaining in soil, thorough removal of root portions is important. Manual control works well but may need to be combined with chemical treatment in large or persistent infestations.

Mechanical

Because Japanese barberry leafs out early, it is easy to identify and begin removal efforts in early spring. Small plants can be pulled by hand, using thick gloves to avoid injury from the spines. The root system is shallow making it easy to pull plants from the ground, and it is important to get the entire root system. The key is to pull when the soil is damp and loose. Young plants can be dug up individually using a hoe, shovel, or similar tool. Hand pulling and using a shovel to remove plants up to about 3 feet high is effective if the root system is loosened up around the primary tap root first before digging out the whole plant.

Herbicide

Treatments using the systemic herbicides glyphosate and triclopyr have been effective in managing Japanese barberry infestations that are too large for hand pulling. For whole plant treatment, apply a 2% solution of glyphosate mixed with water and a surfactant. This non-selective herbicide should be used with care to avoid impacting non-target native plants. Application early in the season before native vegetation has matured may minimize non-target impacts. However, application in late summer during fruiting may be most effective. Glyphosphate may be used undiluted or in a 50% solution with water on cut stumps by directing the spray to just inside the bark and on the cambium and sapwood. Triclopyr may be used as a cut stump or basal bark application as directed by the product label.



There are many native plants common to Indiana that are good alternatives to planting Japanese barberry. Included are New Jersey Tea, Northern Bush Honeysuckle, Common Winterberry, Coralberry and Virginia Sweetspire. Photographs of these and other plants can be found on www.wildflowers.org.

Photos for "Invasive of the Issue" courtesy of www.invasives.org.

Preparing Your Bird Houses for Spring (cont. pg 1)

built-up debris. After you have done the majority of cleaning with a brush, wash the interior and exterior of the house with a low-concentration bleach solution; 1 part bleach to 9 parts water is sufficient. Thoroughly rinse the box and then let it dry entirely before closing. Proper cleaning will help prevent transmission of diseases and parasites between residents of your bird houses. Also, don't forget to wear gloves when cleaning your bird houses and feeders to protect yourself as well.



Bluebird House

If your bird house has been successful in the past, you will want to hang it in the same location. However, if you are uncertain, there are a few things to consider

with respect to placement. Different species of birds like to place their nests in different areas with special features. For example, bluebirds like relatively open areas, wrens prefer some proximity to dense cover, and swallows show an affinity for areas with water nearby. Due to the territorial nature of nest site selection, spacing is also important. Nesting boxes placed close together will not support additional breeding pairs of the same species, even if they are the same size of box. Placing boxes 150-200 feet apart can result in multiple pairs of the same species, while spacing boxes of different dimensions 80-100 feet apart will encourage nesting by a variety of species.

Spring has a way of arriving quickly, so be sure to have your bird house maintenance completed by no later than mid-to-to late March. Clean, well-placed nesting boxes are a welcoming feature for birds in your backyard, and will certainly be occupied readily.

GREENING A DROUGHT DAMAGED YARD

Jessica Norcross, Hendricks County SWCD

Last summer's drought took a toll on most Central Indiana lawns. Cool-season grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*), perennial rye (*Lolium perenne*), and fescue (*Festuca* spp.) turn brown and go dormant to survive drought conditions for up to 5-8 weeks. Under ideal conditions, i.e. no foot traffic, good soil, moderate temperatures, no shade, minimum thatch, etc., most lawns will recover in a few weeks once we've had enough rain. If your lawn did not recover, and you are wondering what to do with it this spring, here are a few options.

If you've decided to reseed this spring, try dormant seeding. Dormant seeding takes advantage of the natural freeze-thaw cycle we experience in Indiana. As the soil heaves and cracks, crevices are created for the seeds which create ideal germination conditions. The seed will lie dormant until the soil temperatures warm up in April or May. Grass seed typically germinates when soil temperatures are 50°F. Depending on your location in the state, dormant seeding can be done as late as March. Dormant seeding also helps you get a jump on crabgrass competition. Avoid using pre-emergent crabgrass controls as this will prohibit turf grass seed germination. Once the seed has germinated, keep the soil fairly moist. Most new plantings need 1 inch of water per week.

If you've decided to give up on grass, try native groundcovers. Many non-native ground cover species, such as myrtle (*Vinca minor*), purple winter creeper (*Euonymus fortunei*), English ivy (*Hedera helix*), and crown vetch (*Coronilla varia*) can become invasive in non-cultivated natural areas. If you have a shady yard, consider brome hummock sedge (*Carex bromoides*), grass sedge (*Carex jamesii*), beak grass (*Diarrhena americana*), and wild stonecrop (*Sedum ternatum*). For sunny yards, try prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*), which smells like popcorn when in bloom!

The Backyard Conservation Newsletter is a product of Hoosier Heartland's Backyard Conservation Committee. Cindy Newkirk serves as the editor and Earth Team Volunteer Geneva Rawlins is the designer. The newsletter is technically reviewed by a team of professional conservationists.

Hoosier Heartland is a not for profit, 501c3 organization run by volunteers serving Central Indiana for over 40 years. Our mission is to help people learn to care for, protect, and manage their natural resources in a way that improves the economy, environment, and quality of life for residents in Boone, Brown, Hamilton, Hancock, Hendricks, Johnson, Marion, Monroe, Morgan, and Shelby Counties.



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