Certified Wildlife Habitat Garden

The National Wildlife Federation encourages people to plant gardens to attract wildlife by providing food, water, cover and a place to raise their young. Can you find each of these items in the garden?

- Food
- Water
- Cover
- Place for Young

This 250 square foot garden contains over 100 species (kinds) of plants. It is made up of five areas: a native landscape for all season interest (spring, summer, fall and winter), prairie, mountain, charred forest and meadow.

The plants have been carefully selected to provide either food or shelter for wildlife. Each plant is native to Montana and can be found in the wild. Next time you go hiking in Montana see how many you can find.

Many of the plants in this garden were discovered by Lewis and Clark and are also used to make medicines. Some have been used by Native Americans and pioneers for food, clothing or for creating products such as soap and rope.

Meadow Area

The meadow contains plants which like lots of sun and water. The more water they get the more flowers you will see.

The solar fountain operates in the summertime on sunny days. The fountain provides a place for small insects and critters to get a drink of water.

When the fountain is not running it acts as a Cairn (pronounced Kern). Cairns (man-made pile of stones) mark trails and have helped people find their way for many centuries before maps were used. Next time you are out hiking look for these landmarks.

At the top of the fountain there is a rock that is shaped like an arrow. It points north like a compass. This is used for orientating yourself. It is important to know where north is so you can find your way out of the Montana wilderness after a fun day of exploring, hiking and/or geocaching.

Charred Forest Area

Plants seen in this area of the garden are plants that commonly thrive or survive after a fire. Fires can be harmful or helpful. A surface fire, commonly started by lightening, will burn litter and leaves lying on the ground. Some plants need this kind of fire to germinate (allow seeds to grow). A surface fire also adds nutrients (food) back into the soil. Many plant's roots will survive a surface fire and will start growing quickly, often within a few weeks.

Look for wildlife in the garden and report your finding on the Helena Garden Club Certified Wildlife Habitat Garden page in the comments section or post photos to the Helena Garden Club Facebook site.

Thank you to the Helena Garden Club, Native Plant Society, Lewis & Clark County Master Gardeners and Becoming an Outdoor Woman for maintenance of the garden.
Mountains have both forests and rocky windy peaks so plants in the front of this area are short and close to the ground like plants seen on a rocky ridge and tall plants with strong stems that survive in wind are planted behind the rock. Many plants in this area have a long root (taproot) to reach water deeper in the ground and store it until needed. This helps them survive in dry, windy areas.

There are many colors of moss and lichen that grow on trees and rocks in the mountains. Lift the lid on the clay pot and explore items that can be found in the wild.

There is pile of pinecones and leaves behind the large rock that beetles and other ground nesting insects call home. Stand on the sidewalk and peek through the wood and rock areas to spot places insects might like to live. Look for seed heads and food birds might like to eat.

The prairie is filled with brightly colored flowers that do not fade easily in heat and sunlight. These plants provide shelter and food to insects such as butterflies, dragonflies, bees and bugs. The grasses will wave to you in the wind. Rocks are used by insects to warm themselves on cool Montana mornings.

The sandy dish with flat rocks is a great resting place for butterflies to sun themselves and get a sip of water without drowning.

Did you know that not all bees will sting you? Most native bees are solitary (live alone) and friendly. On the rare occasion a mason or leaf cutter bee does sting you it will feel more like a mosquito bite than a bee sting. The bee houses provide a place to live close to the food.

The mud pots provide a place for mason bees to gather materials to build a nest.

This area shows how native plants can be used to create all season interest with colorful leaves, blowing grasses, seed heads and flowering plants during the growing season. For a list of specific plants used in this garden visit the Helena Garden Club web site. All plants in this garden can be purchased from nurseries in Montana. See the Montana Native Plant Society web site for more information.

Use native plants in your landscape to increase habitat for pollinating insects. Ground cover called mulch (bark, rocks, leaves, etc.) reduces water needs and weeding. It also gives insects a place to live.

Pick plants that attract the type of wildlife you want to watch. Select plants with colors that look nice together. Look for plants that bloom at different times. Add clumping grasses to blow in the wind and create movement. Pay attention to plant size and water needs and match the plant’s needs to space it will live in.