

Wildlife Smart Landscaping: A Guide for Professionals

Creating and improving wildlife habitat in backyards and greenspaces is gaining popularity. “Wildscaping” has positive ecological value, but improving wildlife habitat can also mean attracting bears into high human-use areas.

Bears foraging and finding food within residential yards, community parks, and other high human-use areas can lead to negative human-bear encounters. Bears are intelligent animals that learn from their experiences; once bears learn where food can be found, they will repeatedly return to that food source. Animals that learn to access food in human-use areas are at greater risk of coming into conflict and are typically killed in an effort to protect people and property.

Because bears are a part of our natural environment, it is crucial that landscapers, landscape architects, arborists, nursery suppliers, and developers play a key role in ensuring that bears aren’t drawn into residential, commercial, or developed areas because of landscaping choices. This guide will assist with managing such considerations without negatively impacting landscape design and the ecological integrity of the project.

In Whistler, BC, the Get Bear Smart Society actively helped to remove mountain-ash trees in high conflict areas and replaced them with non fruit bearing native species.

"Our mountain-ash trees at the base of Blackcomb compromised our conservation principles by encouraging bears into high traffic areas. Removal of these trees was the only suitable resolve."

Arthur DeJong, Environmental Resource Manager, Whistler Blackcomb Mountains

Landscape Design - Selecting Species

Note: any fruit or nut-bearing tree or shrub is considered a wildlife attractant and is a potential food source for bears. Domestic fruit and nut trees are not natural food sources for bears and must be used judiciously.

- **Regulations:** Be aware of municipal bylaw and policy requirements. Many communities have adopted wildlife attractant bylaws that contain requirements for fruit and nut trees. Additionally, some community planning departments require Bear Smart landscaping plans for new developments and renovation projects.
- **Planting density:** Plant berry/nut producing species in low densities and spread them out. This will reduce high density foraging opportunities; bears will be more attracted to mass plantings that provide efficient foraging with high-caloric reward versus low density foraging which requires more effort and energy output to acquire the calories.
- **Planting location:** To reduce the potential for surprising a foraging bear, ensure any berry/nut producing species is not planted near doorways, entranceways, or windows. Avoid planting bear food species within high human-use areas e.g., near children’s play sets or playgrounds, beside a driveway or pathway.
- **Crop abundance:** The more abundant the production of berries, the more attractive the plant is to bears. Clumped berries (like those found on mountain ash trees) are far more attractive than those that are widely spread over the branches. If harvesting the fruit is an issue, consider removing blossoms in the spring (use a pressure washer) to reduce fruit production.

- Other wildlife and environmental considerations: There are many native plant species that don't attract bears and are a great addition to any backyard, green space, or development. Native plant species enhance biological diversity, provide refuge and habitat for wildlife, compensate for land lost to urban sprawl and land conversion, and sequesters carbon to offset CO2 emissions. Vegetation also plays a critical role along streams where the plants can filter runoff, aid in flood control, and provide wildlife corridors.

Refer to the District of Squamish Wildlife Friendly [Landscaping Brochure](#) for a list of recommended and *not* recommended landscaping species. Note that this list is specific to the area noted and may be different in your area.

Consider these additional tips for reducing bear visits to existing landscaping

- Remove plants that bears like to eat, especially ones located in areas where surprise encounters could occur.
- Avoid bone meal or fish fertilizer. These products are highly odourous to animals (fish fertilizer contains decaying fish material) and have been known to attract bears. Consider using composted manure, which is still odourous, but isn't as attractive.
- Avoid seeding with clover, especially along roadways or high human-use areas. Cut grass often and keep the lawn free of dandelions (a favourite bear food).
- Recommend clients utilize electric fencing to effectively deter bears from orchards, gardens, and backyard composters. Refer to the [Electric Fencing](#) section for further information.
- In cases where fruit trees may be "relict" or heirloom species, representing increasingly rare genetic stock, and removal is not an option, ensure that fruit is removed as it ripens and is not left to rot on the ground. Prune to ensure a manageable size for harvesting and consider removing select blossoms in the spring to reduce the overall quantity.
- In addition to local community wildlife attractant bylaws, be cognisant of water conservation or tree removal bylaws along with any fire-smart or invasive species landscaping policies.
- Avoid using herbicides, pesticides, and fungicides. These products often have detrimental effects on untargeted living organisms and are frequently regulated through community bylaws.
- Avoid using synthetic fertilizers. Animals have been known to ingest synthetic fertilizers resulting in liver damage and even death (including pet dogs and cats). These fertilizers also contribute to high nitrogen levels in lakes and streams which can be detrimental to aquatic life. As an alternative, use manure, compost or bark mulch.
- Do not use a chemical spray to thin or prevent fruit from forming on trees and berry bushes. These sprays can be deadly for bees and other invertebrates. Instead, use a pressure washer to remove blossoms.

Additional Resources

Invasive Species Council of BC:

<https://bcinvasives.ca/>

Invasive Species Canada: [Invasive Plants](#)

Fire Smart Canada: [Firesmart Landscaping](#)

Government of Canada: [About Pesticides](#)

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