

Wildlife Friendly Landscaping A Whistler Resident's Guide



Recently, there has been a strong focus on improving and creating wildlife habitat in our backyards and green spaces. Wildscaping undoubtedly has positive ecological value, but in the Whistler area, improving wildlife habitat can also mean attracting bears.

While bears are a part of Whistler's natural environment, enticing them close to our homes either with landscaping that provides food for bears or other food sources like garbage or birdseed can create conflict and be detrimental not just for bears, but for the community as well.

Bears are driven by the biological need to accumulate weight before they den in the fall. Backyard fruit-bearing trees and shrubs like Mountain-ash are an easy source of high calories for a bear. Like us, bears learn from their experiences. Once bears learn where food is, they are likely to keep coming back. This kind of learning is called "food conditioning". Animals that become conditioned to accessing food in residential neighborhoods are at greater risk of getting into conflict and being killed to protect people and their property. While it is unlikely that you would become injured by a bear in your backyard, it makes sense not to gamble with safety.

There are many plant species that don't attract bears and are a great addition to any backyard. 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.

These plants are NOT recommended due to their attractiveness to bears: mountain-ash varieties, rowan tree (*Sorbus spp.*), black and red huckleberries, blueberries (*Vaccinium spp.*), saskatoon berry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*), salmonberry (*Rubus spectabilis*), soapberry (*Shepherdia canadensis*), wild rose (*Rosa pisocarpa*), red-osier dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*), choke cherry (*Prunus virginiana*), kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*), and salal (*Gaultheria shallon*).

All bear attracting plant species identified on the above list are rated as "high". Many other plants also attract bears (such as domestic crops of fruit, berries, and many other native species) A complete list including plants that are rated as medium and low attractants can be found on www.bearsmart.com under Habitat Management or Bear Smart Whistler - Brochures.

The list below suggests some great native plants that enhance wildlife values but do not attract bears. These are just a few examples; there are many other options. All sites are different and have different requirements.

These plants ARE recommended as alternatives as they are not known to attract bears: Douglas maple (*Acer glabrum*), mock orange (*Philadelphus lewisii*), Davidson's penstemon (*Penstemon davidsonii*), Pacific ninebark (*Physocarpus capitatus*), sweet gale (*Myrica gale*), large leafed lupine (*Lupinus polyphyllus*), snowbrush (*Ceanothus velutinous*), goats beard (*Aruncus sylvestris/dioicus*), hardhack (*Spirea douglasii*), willow species (*Salix spp.*), falsebox (*Pachystima myrsinites*), foam flower (*Tiarella trifoliata*) and red columbine (*Aquilegia formosa*).

For additional information on native plant species in Whistler, please refer to:

J. Pojar and A. MacKinnon, 1994. Plants of Coastal British Columbia.

Whistler Biodiversity Project www.whistlerbiodiversity.ca under species list - plants native.

Varner, C. 2002. Plants of the Whistler Region.

Resort Municipality of Whistler - Landscape & Horticulture Department

Tips for reducing bear visits to your backyard

- Remove plants that bears like to eat, especially ones located in areas where we don't want to find bears feeding i.e. next to building entrance-ways, beside windows/doors, near children's play sets; beside driveways, paths, roads and other high use human areas. Plants located away from your house or at the edge of your property may be removed at your discretion, depending on the site's potential for human-bear conflict for you as well as your neighbours. If you are in doubt, we would be happy to do a site visit and make recommendations.
- Use electric fencing to effectively deter bears from orchards, gardens and compost.
- Harvest gardens and fruit from trees when ripe; do not allow fruit to accumulate on the ground. (This is actually the law in Whistler: see Garbage Disposal and Wildlife Attractants Bylaw No.1861, 2008 Sec. 20).
- Do not apply bone meal or fish fertilizer to your gardens.
- Avoid seeding with clover. Keep your grass cut and free of dandelions – a favourite food for bears.
- Keep your outdoor compost clean and free of odours. Avoid placing any fish, meat, bones, egg shells or dairy products into your compost. Add lime to reduce smell and speed decomposition. Keep compost well turned and make sure to alternate between “wet” (kitchen scraps) and “dry” (straw, shredded newspaper, leaves). Consider an indoor worm bin (vermicompost).
- Take down your bird feeders when bears are active. In Whistler, that's from mid-March until the end of November. Birds have abundant natural food sources at this time, and should be encouraged to forage naturally. If you are adamant on feeding birds, take note of Whistler Bylaw 1861 which states that bird feeders must be inaccessible to bears and the area below a feeder must be free of the accumulation of seed and debris from the feeder at all times.

Other tips for wildlife friendly gardening

- Avoid the use of invasive plant species¹ which outcompete native species and contribute to decreased biodiversity. Native species provide richer habitat for wildlife.
- Avoid using herbicides, pesticides and fungicides. These products often have detrimental effects on untargeted living organisms (for example, snail bait can also kill other invertebrates). Use mechanical methods to remove unwanted vegetation – in Whistler it is actually the law! Check out RMOW Bylaw 1822, 2007 that regulates cosmetic non-essential pesticides.
- Avoid using synthetic fertilizers. Animals have been known to ingest synthetic fertilizers which results in liver damage and even death (including dogs and cats). These fertilizers also contribute to high nitrogen levels in lakes and streams. This can be detrimental to aquatic life. Instead, use manure, compost and bark mulch.
- Do not use a chemical spray to thin or abort fruit from forming on trees and berry bushes. These sprays can be deadly for bees and other invertebrates.
- Replace hummingbird feeders with brightly coloured trumpet shaped flowering plant species (let's face it- refined white sugar is not good for anybody!).

Additional resources

Get Bear Smart Society: See our website at www.bearsmart.com/becoming-bear-smart/home/managing-attractants
www.bearsmart.com e: info@getbearsmart.com p: 604-905-4209

Peel's Nursery (Native Plant Material) www.peelsnurseries.com

Sea to Sky Invasive Species Council www.ssisc.info

City Farmer (vermicomposting) www.cityfarmer.org/wormcomp61.html

*Be the leader you know you can be, by having a wildlife friendly back yard,
and encouraging your neighbors to do the same!*

¹ Examples of invasive species that are often planted in backyard landscaping include: scotch broom, foxglove, Japanese knotweed, yellow flag iris, lamium, yellow loosestrife, purple loosestrife, curled pondweed (submerged aquatic), Himalayan blackberry, periwinkle, policeman's helmet and English ivy.