

# Where the Wild Things Are

How one Florida family shook up their yawn of a lawn and created a certified wildlife habitat.

BY HOPE GOODRICH



A master of metamorphosis, this monarch chrysalis, right, transformed the commotion of three boys into quiet, if only for a moment.



**Not long ago**, in a small suburban backyard in Florida, three little boys were stunned into silence. Their eyes fixed on the same point. The quiet was interminable: perhaps 0.8 seconds. Then Davis yelped, “We’re rich!” “We’ve struck gold!” hollered Lucas. “That’s gotta be worth a thousand bucks!” roared Bernardo.

The object that held them rapt was a luminous green monarch butterfly chrysalis (or pupa) studded with gold filigree. Davis is used to finding such treasure in his backyard because it serves as an oasis for small mammals, birds, lizards, frogs, fish, and, yes, butterflies. The place is so inviting that the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) designated it a “backyard

wildlife habitat,” one of 60,000 across the country.

Davis’s mom, Heidi (Davis is her youngest; Bernardo and Lucas, twin brothers, are his pals), grew up on a 500-acre farm in Maine. “It was woods beyond woods,” she says. “I wanted to give my children some of what I had, to teach them to be still in nature, to pay attention.” So, she dug up the border of her lawn and laid in splashes of red and orange flowers to rope in birds and butterflies. She built a pond. She planted fruit trees. “It only takes a teensy space of plants for animals to make communities. The trick is to provide their four basic needs: food, water, cover, and places to raise their young.” WOW



## Sow the Seeds

Plants are the triple-crown winner of habitats: They provide cover, a place to raise babies, and food (orioles love the Chinese red hat vine, left). Here's a saying from the NWF: "Hummingbirds like ice cream cones and butterflies like pizza," meaning that hummers prefer tube-shaped flowers like honeysuckle and columbine, while butterflies enjoy flat flowers like zinnia and phlox. Check out NWF's Web site ([nwf.org](http://nwf.org)) for a list of "host species."

"When we send our children out with a watering can, they are part of creating a habitat," says Heidi. "Then the plants bloom, and the kids get to see who comes to visit."

## Add the Water

So, creating a backyard wildlife habitat is straightforward. Just plant those plants native creatures find irresistible—then add water. You can set a shallow dish near some cover (the easy route), invest a weekend and install a pond (some we tested are at the end of this story), or go the middle-of-the-road method and bring in a birdbath (left).

"The birdbath is an invitation," says Heidi. After the birds freshen up, they check out the other amenities. You have to stay on top of keeping the bath filled: Heidi says most species will snub a tub for weeks if it's empty even for a day. Lucky for her, Davis refills the birdbath daily—and he knows the ideal water depth is just a couple of inches, as birds are waders. Make sure your basin has a rough surface so the poor dears don't slip. If it's smooth, mess up the bottom of the basin with sandpaper or stick on no-slip tub decals.

## Step into Nature

This stepping stone path (left) strings an inviting lane between the animal "cities." Heidi planted low bushes near the path, which gave a welcome to the sparrows, finches, painted buntings, and mourning doves (all ground feeders). When Davis jounces down the path, "the doves don't even fly," says Heidi, "they just watch him pass." Ever since he was a toddler with bells tied to his shoes (so Heidi could track him), Davis, too, has watched *them* pass. "It's about being outside," says his mom. "It's about mental stimulation. Kids will retain a little, and let go of a lot."

For career day at his school, Davis planted vines with chrysalises in a terrarium so his classmates could witness the world he sees each day—and has held on to.



## Miniature Ponds

Adding some water to your backyard gives wildlife a reason to visit your family. True, installing pond takes some digging and some time, but the frogs will love you for it. (Once you've filled the pond kids should be supervised closely.)

You can create your own pond, of course, but a store-bought kit simplifies the process a lot. We tried out two ponds from The Home Depot, which carries a range of kits from Beckett Water Gardening. A third pond that we tested, Garden Escapes Pond, is sold at Wal-Mart.

**Kids' Frog and Goldfish Pond Kit** creates a 35-gallon pond. It includes a PVC liner, a water-circulating pump, and a toad house/water spitter. \$60, available at homedepot.com. (Internet # 167753)

**Beckett's Small Complete Water Garden Kit** creates (up to) a 270-gallon pond. It comes with a flexible PVC liner and pump. \$120, available in-store or at homedepot.com. (Internet # 162032, Store in-stock # 242981)

**Garden Escapes 90-Gallon Pond Kit** comes with a hard plastic liner. \$80, available in-store at Wal-Mart. <sup>1</sup>



## STEPPING STONES



You can find stepping stone kits in most garden centers, but we found that the stones often crack. Not so with the following "recipe." After you've gathered the materials, this project takes just about an hour.

### MATERIALS

- Disposable gloves (optional)
- Water
- Measuring cup (You might want to throw it away afterward.)
- 10 lb of cement mix (We used two 5-lb bags of the Quikrete.)
- Plastic utility bucket (about the size of a mop bucket)
- Large heavy spoon (A metal serving spoon worked best for us.)
- Circular mold, 12 inches in diameter (Soft plastic plant saucers work well, as do silicone, steel, or foil baking pans. You will want to dispose of the mold

- afterwards. The pan should be at least 1 1/2 inches deep; the deeper the dish, the less likely that the stepping stone will break when, well, it's stepped on.)
- Decorative materials: seashells, beads, beach glass, marbles, mementos, tiles
- Towel

1. Wearing the gloves, measure the water into the bucket according to the cement mix directions. Add both bags of the cement, and stir it with a spoon until it becomes the consistency of thick brownie mix (not loose enough to pour or hard enough to crumble). We used

about an extra 1/2 cup water than was called for. To note: If you use the quick-setting Quikrete cement, as we did, you'll want to work quickly so you have plenty of time to decorate.

2. Scoop the mix from the bucket into your mold, filling it almost to the brim.
3. Smooth the surface of the concrete with the back of the spoon as if you're spreading cake frosting.
4. If you're going to let your child press a hand- or footprint into the stone, now's the time. Or she can press in decorations (wiggle the pieces to make sure they will stick) and lay out designs (flowers, hearts, stars, her name).
5. Let the stepping stone dry for 48 hours.
6. Turn mold upside down (on a towel) and tap it with your hand until it loosens.