



## **Giving Nature a Home** by **Liz Stanley**

**WOTC Presentation — May 19, 2020**

Hi everyone! Thanks for attending. I wasn't able to follow the chat during the presentation, but we have a chat transcript and I wanted to make sure everyone had their questions answered. —Liz

*Q: My squirrels destroy my suet feeders immediately when put out. is there a special suet feeder?*

*Q: Any suggestions for keeping squirrels off of bird feeders. My squirrel guards are not working!*

A: There are several different types of suet feeders. I feed suet year round. It's a great source of energy. The most critical times for suet are winter, migration, and nesting/fledging time (May/June.)

In the winter, an easy/cheap source is raw suet from the butcher. As long as temps are consistently below freezing, it won't go bad. Also, squirrels don't seem to go after plain raw suet. You can put it in a simple suet cage on a tree, or a feeder on a post/etc. If in a tree, you'll also get birds like brown creepers that won't go to a feeder.

Another great type of feeder is a suet log, which has holes that you can cram with premade suet plugs, or make your own. The log can be hung vertically or horizontally (because woodpeckers, nuthatches, etc can feed upside down but other birds can't.)

I got my suet log and order suet plugs in bulk from <https://myonlinebirdfood.com/>. You can also buy the same or similar at local stores like All Seasons, Wild Birds Unlimited, etc.

I also have a small cage feeder like this, and these are the suet cakes I use for that: <http://pinetreefarmsinc.com/PTF/>

You can make your own suet log like this: <http://montanawildlifegardener.blogspot.com/2009/08/build-suet-feeder-in-five-minutes.html>

For keeping squirrels off, and this is true of any feeder, you need to mount it on a pole/post with a squirrel baffle (cone/stovepipe/bullet) styles all work depending on your pole/post) so they can't climb, and high enough (at least 5 feet) from the ground. Away from trees and other structures where they can jump down or laterally to the feeder.

You can see my main bird feeder station live streaming on Youtube. :)

<https://www.youtube.com/user/gymell/live>

*Q: Do bluebirds like leafy groundlayer or tallgrass habitat?*

A: Eastern bluebirds (the species have here) prefer open habitat with some trees. No understory or ground cover. You'll see them at the edge of prairies, open fields (golf courses, farm fields, etc.) My neighborhood has more trees than they normally prefer, but enough open space that they will nest in my yard (especially the front yard, which has more open space.) On bluebird trails, boxes are often paired together because tree swallows will also use them. If you like bluebirds, you can volunteer to monitor a bluebird trail for Three Rivers Park District and learn a lot more about the whole process. Also checkout the Bluebird Recovery Program of MN at <https://bbrp.org/>

Q: *Is cardinal flower annual?*

A: I think people in chat answered that better than I could. I've found it to be somewhat short lived, but I don't have a consistently wet environment for it, so perhaps that's just my yard.

Q: *Do you get caddisfly larvae in the moving waters? other aquatic insects that like moving water? Mayflies?*

A: I did have mayflies one year. Here's a photo: <https://pbase.com/image/166151699>

Q: *Can you repeat when to cut back dry plant stems? spring? fall?*

A: In the spring. Over the winter, they provide habitat for wildlife. And in the spring, cut them down to 12-18 inches to allow cavity nesting bees to use them. Here is some great info on that from one of our local experts (and a Wild Ones member): <https://www.startribune.com/queen-of-forgotten-bees-minnetonka-woman-is-on-a-mission-to-save-native-species/434540083/>

Q: *If you have a nest box that is proper is it harmful to mosaic it decoratively? (I suppose the answer is to leave it alone...)*

A: Personally I think it's best to leave it alone, but I'd say if you do decorate, just make sure the materials (paint, etc) aren't toxic, inhibit feeding/fledging, encourage predators, etc.

Q: *For Q&A at the end: for leaf litter - do you recommend just not raking/mulching at all? leaving everything on the ground? we have 3 maple trees. We left some leaf litter this year but also raked up some.*

A: It's good to leave some bare spots for bees, and mulch will block that. As for raking, that would potentially harm any critters that are in the leaf litter. For example, some moth cocoons will simply be wrapped up in leaves. I try to only remove some of the larger oak leaves from parts of the garden, and I do that by hand, no rake. I was out the other day doing that, and found a woolly bear curled up in the leaves. Any leaves I do remove, I dump in a large pile/compost under our pine trees. I'm fortunate to have the space to do that.

Q: *How many birds are on your backyard list?*

A: I have 98 on the list, 11 of those were just flying over. So looks like ~87 visited the yard: Here's my current list: [http://www.overlookcircle.org/?page\\_id=153](http://www.overlookcircle.org/?page_id=153)

Q: *Tons of garlic mustard on the edge of the road in the wild areas on the east side of France Ave. S. between 39th and 41st Streets. They are in full bloom now! What can be done about getting rid of these? I don't know who owns the property.*

A: Honestly I don't know. There is so much around. It's depressing. Easy enough to pull it up, but I don't know how to go about identifying property owners or adopting those types of properties. The buckthorn/garlic mustard pulling events I've seen have all been at nature centers and parks.

Q: *Is there a rhyme or reason to planting certain plants near or next to each other or more importantly, plants that should not be planted together?*

A: Other people on chat and in Wild Ones with more gardening design expertise can speak to that better than I can. I'm very much a trial and error gardener. I've found that what seems like it should work on paper often doesn't in reality. And other things I wouldn't expect, do work. I think the plants ultimately figure it out for themselves. Some helpful resources for me have been native plant nursery catalogs, which will have those suggestions. Also if I see a plant is doing well in certain conditions, I consider others that also (on paper) should do well under those same conditions. And sometimes I just experiment, like under our white pines where it is dry, acidic, full shade. Speaking of white pines, one thing I do know is that I can't have currant/gooseberry in my yard, because it can carry white pine blister rust which will kill the trees. I pull any I find.

Q: *Did you mention how much space you have/ big your yard is? Im trying to figure out how much I can do in my .33acre yard*

A: It's 1/2 acre.

Q: *What is the grass you have installed?*

A: The specific grass we used is Eco Grass from Prairie Moon Nursery. I'm sure there are other similar grasses available from different native nurseries. Another option would be to do a sedge lawn/meadow.

Q: *Proper cleaning of feeder, bird bath, and nesting?*

Q: *Liz refers often to cleaning bird feeders. What is the process?*

A: **Feeders:** disassemble and thoroughly wash/scrub with weak bleach solution at least a couple times a year. I do that in the driveway with a big rubbermaid container, a container of bleach, and a garden hose. Buy quality feeders that are easy to clean. They'll last longer and are more likely to be kept clean if it's easy to do. I scrape off gunk and empty as often as needed. Hummingbird feeders, rinse out and wipe down every time you refill, and use a small bottle brush to get the feeding ports/openings clean. Don't leave old/wet/moldy food in feeders. Especially after it rains, watch out for that. Use domes on all your feeders to protect from weather as much as possible.

**Bird bath:** dump and refill often. Scrub out (I keep a brush on the ground right by mine).

**Nesting:** clean out any old nest as soon as the chicks have fledged. Scrape out any debris/feces, etc. Replace/repair old boxes.

Q: *How do you attract mealworms?*

A: I don't attract them (not a native species), I buy them from the wild bird store (live mealworms for bluebird nesting season, dried for winter/migration, which I scatter on the ground.) You can raise them yourself, which I've never done.

Q: *How do you deal with the squirrels. I could never put food on the ground! That would just feed the squirrels.*

A: I let them eat whatever falls. I mentioned above about baffles and placement/mounting of feeders.

Q: *What about bee lawn?*

A: I let wild violets (native) grow in the grass, but I'm not a proponent of dandelions/clover/creeping Charlie or other non native flowers that are often encouraged as part of a "bee lawn". My point about just letting the lawn "go natural" with those types of plants pertains to that. In my garden I have several early blooming native wildflowers and also native flowering shrubs are very helpful for pollinators early in the season. Make sure to source your plants from nurseries and organizations specializing in native species, and not big box stores or mainstream nurseries.

Q: *So you just overseeded?*

A: That's what we did. It's a slow process, seems to be working. I suppose the other option would have been to remove all the grass and start from seed. Converting areas of useless areas of lawn is another strategy. :)

Q: *Do you mulch the plant beds or just the paths? Any mulch preference?*

A: We did to mulch the plant beds at one time, but as the plants have filled, in we just leaves those be. For paths, I use free wood chips available for the taking from the city. It's a bit of effort, but a cheap solution.

Q: *For Q&A time: Please talk about weeds/weeding—what were the challenges, how did you address them, what are the current needs and time required to maintain? How about plants reseeding into pathways?*

A: Weeding, yes initially the challenge was getting rid of the buckthorn, mulberry and honeysuckle. The buckthorn took several years to get under control. I have a weed wrench (described here: <https://www.ecolandscaping.org/07/resources/product-reviews/product-review-weed-wrench/>) to pull small saplings that pop up (and that I miss before they get too big to pull by hand.) I pull dandelions and other weeds like that by hand, whenever I'm outside. I believe the weed wrench is no longer made, but there are similar tools available.

Letting the grass grow long has cut down on the amount of those. In the back, we used to have a lot of plantain, which we pull by hand. I have a parsnip predator (though I don't have parsnip, it can be used for other things) described here: <https://driftlessprairies.org/tools-of-the-trade/parsnip-predator/>

Creeping charlie has been the worst thing in recent years. A neighbor behind us let it just go, and it spread into the back of our yard. We went out and laid weed fabric covered in wood chips along the utility easement (on our property) behind our fence in an effort to create a physical barrier. And I pulled a lot by hand in the garden, and covered with a thick layer of wood chips. Seems to have helped. As you can see here, it was pretty bad at one point: <https://pbase.com/gymell/image/160172055>

I really don't know how much time overall I spend on that, just try to do a little every time I'm out. It is something that never ends, though.

For removing grass, I have a kick sod cutter. This tool is made here in MN, so I actually drove up to buy one, from the guy who makes them. <http://quailsodcutter.com/> . Using one of these is quite a workout.

I have to admit I'm not really good about editing plants that "escape" from where I put them. If I need to, I pull them. The cup plant is starting to win the battle though. Better that, than buckthorn I suppose!