

The dynamic Habitats at Home display garden, just inside the entrance to Bellevue Botanical Garden, was created by WSU Extension King County Master Gardeners with financial support from King Conservation District



GROW

Nourish the Wild Ones

Welcome pollinators with ideas from Bellevue Botanical Garden's new Habitats at Home display

By Lorene Edwards Forkner /
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AS NATURAL SPACES

DIMINISH, pollinators, birds and wildlife rely more on domestic landscapes for survival. Whether you tend a few pots on a patio or larger beds and borders, your garden nourishes these creatures. In return they pollinate your crops (yum, berries), help control pests, and provide the beauty of birdsong and fluttering butterflies.

Habitats at Home, the newest display garden at Bellevue Botanical Garden, is filled with flowers — lots of flowers. According to Garden Director James Gagliardi, the project was created by the Washington State University Extension King County Master Gardener Program in partnership with the garden, with support from King Conservation District, which promotes the sustainable use of natural resources throughout King County.

Located at the garden's entrance, adjacent to the waterfall, the Habitats at Home garden demonstrates the allure of a landscape designed to attract and support wildlife with food, water and shelter.

This is a Master Gardeners endeavor, so you know everyone did their homework. According to team leader Gary Scheider, three Master Gardener volunteers brainstormed an “impossibly long” list of plants for the design, aiming for a mix that would include 75% North American natives. This detail matters: Native plants attract pollinators that have evolved alongside them, and many native bees are specialists, meaning they rely on specific native plants to feed their larvae.

“To narrow the list, we used the concept of pollinator syndromes, or flower traits that appeal to a type of pollinator like color, flower shape, scent, pollen, nectar and nectar guides to help predict the type of pollinator that will visit the flower,” Scheider says. “Considering these traits, we selected plants that should supply the highest value to the largest number and widest range of pollinators.”

Equipped with the finessed plant list, local designer and Master Gardener Dana Niblack led a design team in bringing the exhibit to life, creating what she calls “a place of refuge from the outside world.” Using color and plant placement to draw attention throughout the landscape, which was installed in spring 2025, the designer infuses the garden with beauty and valuable resources for wildlife.

Soothing cool colors greet visitors at one end of the garden where plants with silver-blue foliage, like blue oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*) and blue-leaved hebe (*Hebe glaucophylla*), surround flowering bulbs and perennials in lavender and soft yellow. A robust stand of anise-scented sage (*Salvia guaranitica*) is hummingbird central all summer long, injecting energy and movement into the quiet planting.

A woodland planting at the center of the 65-foot-by-13-foot bed briefly interrupts the flow of flowers. A Pacific Fire vine maple (*Acer circinatum* ‘Pacific Fire’) underplanted with deer fern (*Struthiopteris spicant*) provides shelter and favorable nesting conditions for insects, as does leaf litter and rotting wood. Butterflies, birds and bees drink water from a scooped basalt boulder and a nearby irrigation head keeps the shallow pool full and fresh during the



A scooped stone birdbath holds water for passing wildlife.

PHOTOS BY JAMES GAGLIARDI

Bellevue Botanical Garden: 12001 Main St., Bellevue; 425-452-2750; bellevuebotanical.org. Open dawn to dusk daily. Admission is free.

dry season. Excitement ran high last fall when mushrooms appeared on a log in the garden, indicating a healthy mycological population.

Moving along, the colors shift to more energizing hues. A meadow-like planting of tufted hair grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa* ‘Goldtau’) with clumps of long-blooming red Paprika yarrow (*Achillea millefolium* ‘Paprika’), orange Totally Tangerine avens (*Geum chilense* ‘Totally Tangerine’) and Golden Fleece goldenrod (*Solidago sphacelata* ‘Golden Fleece’) attract foraging pollinators.

Kids of all ages are fascinated by a curious focal point in the garden: the “bug snug,” a teepee of tree limbs filled with twigs and plant clippings. The bug snug adds a vertical accent in the landscape while supplying nesting habitat and winter shelter.

Permanent interpretive signs and several small, easy-to-update chalkboard tablets highlight wildlife benefits and point to seasonal shifts. Like other beds throughout the botanical garden, discreet signage with QR codes directs visitors to information about plants in the garden.



Mushrooms growing on a rotting log demonstrates the garden's healthy mycological population.

Habitats at Home is a visual and functional feast. At just over a year old, the garden is a lively environment filled with native bees, butterflies, moths, beetles, beneficial wasps, syrphid flies, birds, amphibians and even bats — although no one's happy about resident marauding deer. The Master Gardener volunteers who installed the garden in 2025 are responsible for its maintenance during the display's three-year run. 📧

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