

Landscaping for Wildlife

Living on a lake provides an opportunity to get to know your waterway intimately and experience its changes with time and the seasons. It also provides opportunities to watch wildlife that utilize the lake ecosystem. Hearing the eerie call of a Common Loon, watching a Bald Eagle soar, or viewing a deer as it takes a drink at the water's edge are experiences that enriches shoreline living.

One of the best things you can do to enhance your waterfront property for wildlife habitat is to maintain the natural vegetation along the shoreline or restore it by planting a mixture of trees, shrubs, and ground cover. Planting a variety of vegetation provides habitat for many wildlife species and has other benefits including, protection of water quality, property enhancement, and shoreline erosion control. Songbirds, butterflies, small mammals, and other animals have a greater chance of finding food, shelter, and nesting sites in natural vegetation than a lawn.

Enhancing Wildlife Habitat on Shoreline Properties

One of the first steps to consider when designing a landscaping project to enhance wildlife and protect water quality is to determine the growing conditions and aesthetic characteristics of the site. Five characteristics of the site should be considered:

1. Soil type
2. Slope and orientation to the sun
3. Wildlife—both existing and desired
4. Existing vegetation (including likely natural vegetation if site is already developed)
5. Structures and their relation to the landscape

The next steps are to find out which plants are best suited to the above site conditions and where they should be planted. Integrating the site characteristics into a design can be a lot of fun. The design may be formal, with edged flower gardens, or an informal approach that mimics natural shoreline vegetation.

When selecting plants, include a mixture of ground cover plants, shrubs, and trees. Native plants will have the best chance of survival and require the least amount of maintenance. Additionally, native plant communities often have an aesthetic fit to the site which is difficult to achieve with a collection of exotic plants. Many of our favorite landscape plants—from dogwoods to violets—are native.

Another design aspect to consider is size. The wildlife habitat area should be at least 35 feet wide or wider starting from the water's edge. The wider the shoreline vegetation strip, the more effective it will be at protecting water quality. But remember, maintaining any width of shoreline vegetation is better than none at all.

Installing birdhouses, bird feeders, and nesting platforms may increase your chances of attracting certain birds. Other design features that can be incorporated include footpaths, a grassy area, benches or picnic tables, and play areas for children. Maintaining views and access to the lake should also be included as part of the design.

How to Stop Losing Ground

Shoreline vegetation can help prevent shoreline erosion. The Watershed Council offers a service to assess and control shoreline erosion. The on-site assessment includes an inspection of the extent of the problem, causes, and potential solutions.

One of the best methods to control shoreline erosion on inland lakes is a method called biotechnical erosion control. Biotechnical erosion control brings together biological, ecological, and engineering concepts to produce a living, functioning system to prevent erosion.

Biotechnical erosion control uses vegetation (living and non-living) along with other flexible structures such as rock riprap. It is one of the best methods to use where the shore is subject to occasional ice scouring because it can rebound quickly on its own following disturbance. The vegetation used in a biotechnical erosion control project can be selected to enhance wildlife habitat too.

Protecting Water Quality on Shoreline Properties

Besides enhancing wildlife habitat, planting a shoreline vegetation strip has other values for your property.

- Trees, shrubs, and vegetation in shoreline areas prevent erosion. The deep roots of trees and shrubs bind the soil in place. In most situations, vegetation can control shoreline erosion more cost-effectively than seawalls or other engineered structures.
- Shoreline vegetation traps sediment, preventing it from clouding the water and destroying fish habitat.
- Shoreline vegetation reduces the amount of polluted runoff entering your lake or stream by intercepting and filtering pollutants out of rain or snow melt. Lawns can only remove a limited amount of nutrients from runoff.

The Benefits Are Endless

Shoreline vegetation offers privacy and protection from sound, reducing the noise you may hear from motorboats, personal watercraft, or your neighbors. Natural landscaping can enhance the property value of waterfront property.

Planting trees, shrubs, and wildflowers reduces the amount of lawn on properties and the amount of time needed for lawn maintenance. Extra time can be spent relaxing and enjoying northern Michigan's lakes!

Protecting Wildlife Habitat During New Construction

For new construction on waterfront property, maintaining natural vegetation is the best recommendation.

Where excavation and building will occur, care should be taken to avoid damage to the entire tree including the root system. The root system on some tree species extends 2-3 times beyond the branch area of the tree. Shallow-rooted trees are most susceptible to root system disturbance. Clay soils and soils with high water tables are especially prone to compaction and subsequent damage to trees.

Information in this article was adapted from materials developed by Carrol Henderson, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.