



Vegetation Layers

Fields and forests look very different from yards and city parks. Humans seem to feel more comfortable when they have a clear view around them. Some wild animals feel that way too, but most prefer to stay in or near vegetation so that they are not as obvious to their enemies. When humans move into an area, one of the first things that they do is to remove high grass and brush. This removes food, cover and homes for many species of wildlife. One of the keys to keeping or attracting wildlife is to preserve or replace this protective cover.

In the wild, vegetation consists of a number of different layers that vary in height. Typically, there is a low layer made up of **forbs**, which are wide leafed plants, a somewhat taller layer of grasses, an even taller layer of **shrubs** and one or more very tall layers of trees. Not all habitats have all of these layers. Prairies have only the forb and grass layers. Forests may have only the forb, shrub and tree layers. Habitats that have the greatest variety of layers are found where fields and forests meet. These areas experience what is known as **the edge effect** and attract the greatest variety of wildlife.

This edge effect can be recreated by providing the different layers of vegetation that are found in nature. Beds of native wildflowers act as the forb layer. Flowers of the same species planted in groups form masses of color when they bloom. These large patches of color are very attractive to butterflies and other pollinators. Lawns function as the grass layer. Unfortunately, lawns normally consist of only one species of plant. Native prairies have hundreds of species of grasses and other plants. If possible, allow forbs to grow in the lawn to increase its **diversity**. Including a small area of native grasses may also benefit some wildlife species. Shrub layers act as travel corridors, feeding and nesting areas for wildlife. These layers should be rich in flowering, seed and fruit producing plants.

Evergreen shrubs provide wildlife with important protection from cold, wet and windy weather. Trees make up the tallest layer and are an important source of food, shelter and living space for wildlife. Nut producing trees are especially important in providing critical winter food supplies for many birds and mammals.

The naturally occurring boundary between a field and a forest consists of a gradual change from the low vegetation of the field through the shrub layer that is found where field and forest meet to an area of taller trees often with few other plants beneath them. To recreate this edge effect at our site the shortest plants should be placed in the front of the beds and the tallest at the back. Avoid planting things in straight lines. Straight lines are rare in nature. Natural boundaries of vegetation layers often appear as gentle curves. This increases the amount of edge and gives the site a pleasing appearance that is attractive to wildlife.

Unbroken lines of trees and shrubs produce a beneficial pattern for wildlife. These vegetation lines allow animals to travel without being exposed to predators. Trees and shrubs at the site that are connected to other lines of trees and shrubs in the area increase the chance of wildlife moving onto the site. These **travel corridors** allow animals to move between areas of a habitat. Some travel corridors already exist in urban areas in the form of vegetation along streams or power line right of ways. Connecting areas of food, cover and shelter benefit wildlife species that need larger living spaces than small sites can provide.

Texas has at least 10 different ecological regions. Choosing plants that are native to the local ecological region increases their chance of surviving and being used by local wildlife. The greatest variety of wildlife can be attracted by planting a wide variety of native plants whose flowering and fruiting times occur throughout the year.

Texas Birds and the Vegetative Layers They Live In

