

HABITAT GARDENING IN A STRICT HOA

Design strategies for creating wildlife habitat within community guidelines

Creating true habitat gardens in a highly regulated homeowners association can be challenging. With thoughtful design, clear maintenance cues, and strategic communication, it is possible to establish thriving native landscapes that support wildlife while remaining acceptable to neighbors and governing boards.

When I moved into my property, the landscape consisted of two acres of lawn with narrow borders dominated by invasive and non native plants. My goal was to gradually replace these areas with native species that support pollinators, birds, and other wildlife — while working within existing expectations.

Phase One: Working Within Existing Borders

I began by removing invasive plants and replanting within established borders that neighbors were already accustomed to seeing. Plantings were layered with shrubs, perennials, and living mulches such as wild strawberry, golden ragwort, and blue eyed grass.

A narrow lawn edge and clearly maintained borders helped signal intentional design. Although the plantings were exuberant, the defined edges and layered structure minimized concerns.

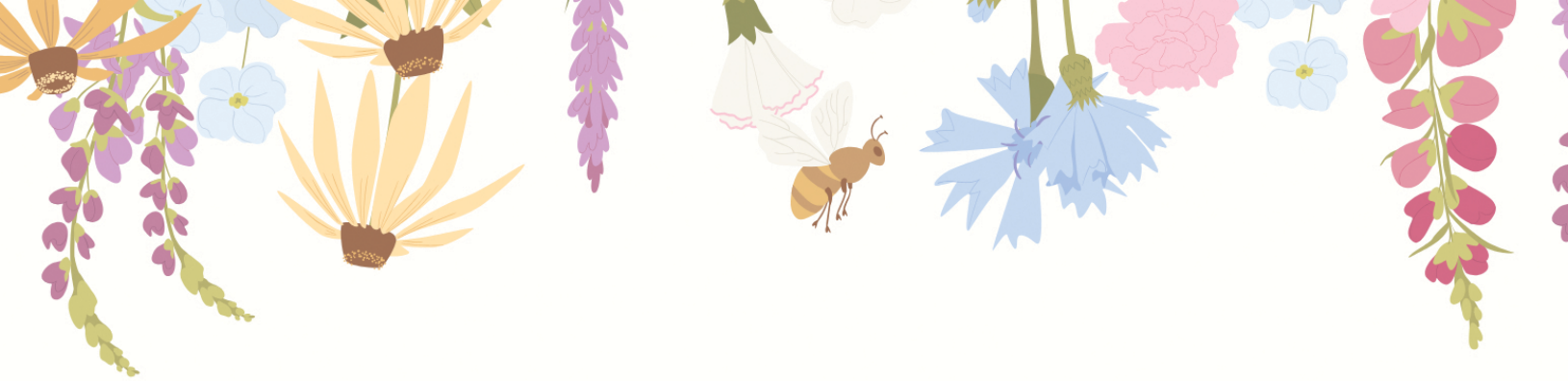
Phase Two: Expanding with Permission

Next, I requested approval to install a perennial border along my long, curving driveway. This area, previously lawn over a septic field, was designed as a meadow style border with multiple layers and filled niches to maximize habitat.

Living groundcovers stabilized the soil, while grasses and shrubs added structure and seasonal interest. The border blooms from early April through November, providing continuous resources for pollinators and wildlife. Edges are maintained throughout the growing season as a concession to neighbors.

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Phase Three: Protecting the Shoreline

An existing natural shoreline had historically been kept mowed. I allowed native plants — including buttonbush, seaside goldenrod, rose mallow hibiscus, seashore mallow, St. John’s wort, false indigo bush, and panic grasses — to expand and establish a healthy riparian buffer.

When concerns arose, I worked with the state Department of Environmental Quality, providing documentation and examples of award winning riparian gardens I had designed in Northern Virginia. As a design concession, I installed a garden style path through the 200 foot buffer and maintain selective seasonal cutting to preserve a cared for appearance.

Phase Four: Connecting Habitat Corridors

Finally, I linked these landscapes with linear pollinator gardens along an existing wooden walkway to the shoreline and dock. These corridors allow close viewing of pollinators and create continuous habitat for wildlife movement.

The result is a connected system supporting foxes, deer, bobwhite quail, and numerous bird species, including eastern bluebirds, brown thrashers, blue grosbeaks, cardinals, and swallows. Native plants have naturalized throughout the gardens, strengthening the ecosystem over time.

Clear edges, visible care, and intentional design make habitat gardens possible — even in the most restrictive communities.

This work has been recognized through invitations to Homegrown Virginia and sustainable garden tours for landscape designers. While challenges remain, thoughtful design and persistence have preserved the majority of these habitat landscapes and demonstrated what is possible within HOA environments.



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