Nature conservation is often portrayed as scientists and land managers working to save large, charismatic animals in majestic landscapes. But these days, nature needs our help in all places, big and small. Here are some landscape design strategies that can be used to beautify any property, no matter what the size, while protecting soil, water, native plants and wildlife.

Look at your lawn with an eye towards reducing its size. Large lawns require lots of maintenance and aren’t particularly friendly to wildlife. Look for ways to create a series of attractive garden rooms in the landscape by partitioning smaller spaces with islands and peninsulas of new planting beds. If there are trees scattered throughout the lawn, tie them together with one or more large beds. Connect the rooms with interesting paths and fill the new beds with native perennials and grasses that provide habitat for butterflies and other insect pollinators.

Take stock of shady, tree covered areas with weak sod and eroding soil. Create mini-woodlands in these zones by letting leaves remain on the ground to build up a rich carpet of mulch. Through the process of natural regeneration, seeds of trees and shrubs will soon begin to sprout and grow. Supplement natural regeneration with plantings that will form a multi-layered forest structure of canopy trees, understory trees, shrubs and groundcovers. Many animals require tree cavities in which to raise their young so preserve dead trees whenever possible. Hazardous trees can often be topped to fifteen or twenty feet. The remaining trunk is sure to attract a variety of woodpeckers and other insect-eating birds.
Consider the vegetation along your property boundaries. One of the most important things that you can do for wildlife is to plant mixed hedges with a variety of native plants that flower and fruit at different seasons. Songbirds, in particular, benefit from the dense protective cover offered by hedgerows. Ideally a three-layered pattern, one that resembles the structure of a natural forest edge, should be the aim. To create this effect, plant three rows, with small trees in the back, large shrubs in the middle and small shrubs in front. Ask your neighbors to join in by planting their side of the property line, the wider the better.

Observe the flow of water across your property during a rain shower. Stormwater can pick up and deposit significant amounts of pollution into local water bodies. Slow the flow and help it soak into the ground before reaching lakes and streams by creating a rain garden. This is a shallow depression designed to catch the first inch or so of rain that flows from your roof, sidewalk and driveway. When planted with tough native plants that can withstand periodic flooding, rain gardens make beautiful additions to the landscape.

Your conservation sanctuary of garden rooms, surrounded by meadows, hedgerows, woodlands and rain gardens, may not attract any lions, tigers, or bears but you’ll be richly rewarded with the sights and sounds of the butterflies, songbirds and other small critters that will find a home in this special place.

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