

One woman's wild life

Naturalist Pat Sutton exhorts landscapers, garden centers, homeowners to plant native habitats and welcome the critters.

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If you wonder what drives Pat Sutton, come on in.

Clues are everywhere inside her 19th-century farmhouse in Goshen, Cape May County, a tiny dot of a place between Delaware Bay and the ocean.

The shower curtain is imprinted with butterflies. Owls decorate throws on the sofa. Piles of plant and bird books cover the coffee table.

Had you gone around to the backyard, you'd have no need for clues. The key to understanding Sutton is staring you in the face: It's her wildlife garden.



It may look brown and fuzzy, as befits the middle of November, but this mostly native-plant garden still buzzes and trills with life.



Acrobatic goldfinches are darting about. Jewel-red cardinals are plucking sunflower hearts from the feeders. Leopard frogs are all eyes in the pond, and a solitary butterfly, a common buckeye that is not so common in these parts, is lingering on the path.

"Isn't this neat?" Sutton asks, as if it were all new to her.

For almost 30 years, as a naturalist, educator, and writer at the Cape May Bird Observatory and Cape May Point State Park, and now in retirement, Sutton has been promoting wildlife gardening in the region and country through lectures and workshops, magazine articles and books, birding trips and garden tours.

Here's the goal: to create gardens that are richly layered, diverse habitats able to provide food (nectar, nuts, seeds, berries), water, and places to nest and hide, for birds, butterflies, bees, insects, frogs, and other critters, in every season.

"I'm driven," Sutton admits.

Gretchen Whitman, director of the Nature Center of Cape May, estimates that, over the years, Sutton has influenced the gardening habits of thousands of people and, thus, had a major impact on the region's environment.

"She's like a pied piper of the backyard habitat movement and she's been advocating it since before it became really fashionable," Whitman says, adding that Sutton isn't just talking it up with gardeners in Nature Center workshops.

"Her mission is to talk to landscapers and garden centers, to educate the people who are selling the plants and designing the gardens, that it's not difficult to make different choices for your yard," she says.

