



YOUNG WILLIE WAGTAIL



Habitat
Heroes

cost-effective habitat gardens

Starting a new garden or fixing up an old one can be overwhelming. Materials, garden supplies and tools are expensive. Add in the cost of plants and you can quickly blow your budget. The key to creating a cost-effective habitat garden is to have a little patience and build your garden slowly. Start small and observe your garden. Watch as the seasons play out through the year, start planting out a small garden bed and discover what works (and doesn't work). This gradual approach will hone your gardening skills, help you to understand the conditions of your garden (soil, climate conditions, sun, shade ...) and will save time and money in the long run.



Don't start from scratch

Overgrown trees and shrubs may look untidy, too large, or unfamiliar but don't pull them out! Search online and read about the existing plants in your garden, go for a walk around your neighbourhood and see if anyone else grows them well- they may look great with a hard prune or relocated to a better position. Large shrubs and trees give weight to your garden and if you rip them all out you may find yourself buying fast growing or expensive mature plants because your garden looks bare.



Say no to pebbles

Not only are pebbles expensive, but you will also need to install weed matting below the rocks to block weeds or edging material to keep the pebbles out of your lawn. Because pebbles do not aid plant growth or soil health- they raise the soil temperature, you will be constantly watering and tending your stressed, thirsty plants. A medium chunky bark mulch, however, provides ideal growing conditions for native plants. Aim to cover the soil with plants – indigenous groundcovers and wildflowers are ideal. Ground covers will discourage weeds better than pebbles and mulch and once established, will require far less work as mulch breaks down and must be replenished or replaced each year.



Save money

Many native grasses and strappy-leaved plants such as Kidney Weed (*Dichondra repens*), Tufted Bluebell (*Wahlenbergia communis*) and Native Violet (*Viola hederacea*) can be easily divided and transplanted into empty areas of your garden. To minimise damage to the root system, use a garden fork to divide plants rather than a spade. Remember plants look best when they are massed together or planted in drifts.

Start a compost heap

The key to healthy plants is compost. Start a compost pile today, it doesn't have to be fancy. Just start making a pile in the yard. If you are after something more structured, Wyndham City residents are eligible for significant discounts on worm farms and compost bins. Cut back, clean up and mow your lawn, but don't throw your green waste away. Composted plant matter from your garden and kitchen is the foundation of a thriving, sustainable habitat garden.

How to start a compost heap:

- Choose a dry shady spot near a tap 1 x 1 x 1 metre is ideal. If you have the space, make two heaps- one to add fresh ingredients to and the other to transfer the usable compost into
- Add anything organic: leaves, food scraps, coffee grounds, sawdust, eggshells
- Avoid meat products, greasy food, dog or cat waste, chemically treated paper
- Keep it damp
- Turn your compost now and again to add air to the mix – this helps it break down faster
- Compost takes about 2- 3 months to break down, if you need compost in a hurry, purchase it from your local garden supply store (starting a heap now means you will never have to buy it again)

Buy smaller plants

By buying large plants from the nursery, you are paying a lot of money for a plant that was nurtured in a perfect environment. Your garden will not offer the same climate-controlled greenhouse conditions. Better to start with smaller, younger (and cheaper) 'plants- such as tube stock, that will adapt to a new environment faster.

Compost tea

Make your own fertiliser using a compost tea recipe or pick up a bag of cow or sheep manure from a farm gate

Compost tea is relatively easy, cheap, and fun to make – it is a great activity to do with kids! Actively Aerated Compost Teas (AACT) can multiply populations of microbes in your habitat garden. Microbes, also known as microorganisms, are microscopic fungi, algae, and bacteria. They digest organic matter and provide nutrients to plants and improve the structure of your soil and attract wildlife to your garden.

How to make compost tea:

- Fill a 20-litre bucket with water (use tank water if you can or if you use tap water, dechlorinate it by leaving the water outside in the sun for 24 hours before you make your brew)
- Suspend 4 cups of fresh smelling compost in a stocking and place in the bucket of water like a tea bag.
- Aerate the water using an aquarium pump (or get your kids to stir vigorously regularly)
- Add 2 tablespoons of simple sugars to feed the microbes (you can use regular, unsulphured molasses, maple syrup or fruit juice)
- Leave it to brew for one to two days
- Smell test- it should smell sweet and earthy
- Use the tea immediately (strain and spray on foliage, or drench your soil)

Cow and sheep manure are low in nutrients, will condition your soil and are ideal for native gardens. Fresh manure from the farm gate is cheaper than store bought fertiliser. You will need to let the fresh manure sit for 6 weeks (you can add it to your compost heap to rot down). If you need to use it immediately put the manure into a plant pot, run water through it as this will dilute the nutrient levels and will allow any weed seeds to sprout and then die – you can use the liquid and the manure on your native plants.



Remove your lawn

A good-looking lawn can be costly and labour intensive. Turn your grassed area into a habitat garden (without chemicals):

- Sprinkle the area with a fertiliser such as blood and bone and water well,
- Lay newspaper (at least 15 pages thick) or light, flattened cardboard boxes over the area (remove staples or packing tape),
- Apply 50mm or more of compost, followed by 70mm of mulch (straw mulch is ideal) and 50 – 75mm of bark mulch.
- If the area is going to be planted immediately apply 200 – 300mm compost blend (three parts soil to one-part compost) over the newspaper.

Use grass for hedges

Create a fast-growing border in a small sunny area such as a terrace or balcony by planting tall, indigenous grasses in a row of rectangular boxes. Silky Blue Grass (*Dicanthem sericeum*) which grows to about 800mm tall and 200mm wide, is a good choice for a skinny border. If you have an area that is surrounded by an ugly fence, consider planting large grasses along the fence to soften the perimeter. Poa labillardierei grass is a high-impact, low-dollar solution.

The best way to create a cost-effective habitat garden is to connect with your neighbours. Explore your neighbourhood and start a conversation. I have never met a gardener who is not happy to share seed, offer advice and give you cuttings of plants! Just make sure you are not accepting invasive weeds like the Gazania daisy (refer to the Wyndham City Habitat Heroes booklet to identify invasive weeds). Neighbours may also be willing to share tools with you if you return them the moment you are done. Keep an eye out for people giving or throwing away building products such as old bricks and sleepers – these materials can be used to edge paths and garden beds. If a neighbour has cut down a tree offer to take away a log or a large branch as these can be sheltering spots for lizards and a balance beam or log rounds for children to play on. Some of the most beautiful, well considered gardens I have visited have been created on a budget over many years. Start small, take it slow and learn as you go.

References

Adams, George *Birdscaping Australian Gardens. Using Native Plants to Attract Birds to your Garden* Penguin Books, 2015

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