

# Conservation@Home

[extension.illinois.edu/fmpt/conservationhome](https://extension.illinois.edu/fmpt/conservationhome)

shaping private and community landscapes in a conservation-minded way

## Fall Newsletter

Autumn is a season of preparation, not just for us but for the wildlife that share our spaces. By leaving seed heads, shelter, and a few fallen leaves, we can create cozy habitats that carry birds, pollinators, and other creatures through the winter. With just a little care, our fall gardens can stay alive with purpose even as they go to rest.



## Wildlife Habitat



Autumn marks a critical transition for wildlife, as many species prepare to overwinter or migrate. Birds rely on seed sources, pollinators seek cover in leaf litter, and countless beneficial insects find refuge in stems and brush. Providing these resources ensures that ecological processes continue uninterrupted, supporting biodiversity through the coldest months.

Beyond wildlife, fall habitat management also benefits the landscape itself. Decomposing organic matter returns nutrients to the soil, protects against erosion, and increases moisture retention. Together, these natural cycles strengthen ecosystem resilience, showing how small, thoughtful actions in the fall can have long-lasting ecological impacts.



### Leave the leaves

A layer of fallen leaves offers shelter for insects, pollinators, and small creatures, while also enriching the soil as it breaks down.



### Keep the seed heads

Many birds rely on dried flower and grass seeds for food in winter, and the stems provide perches and hiding spots.

Gather branches, sticks, or garden trimmings into a small pile to provide shelter for birds, pollinators, and overwintering wildlife.

# Habitat Preservation for Pollinators



Pollinators rely on fall preparation to survive winter. Some butterflies migrate south, while others remain, seeking shelter in leaf litter or hollow stems. Native bees often overwinter in hollow stems, underground burrows, or brush piles. By leaving leaves, stems, and natural debris in place, we provide safe resting spots for these insects until spring.



Late-blooming flowers are also critical for pollinators, offering nectar to fuel energy reserves. Asters, goldenrod, and sedum extend the season and help insects build the strength needed to survive. Even small garden patches with these plants can make a meaningful difference.



Together, shelter and food form the foundation of a pollinator-friendly fall garden. Small actions such as leaving leaves, saving hollow stems, and maintaining brush piles will support the insects that play a vital role in our ecosystems. By planning ahead, gardeners can help pollinators thrive even in the colder months.

*Ainsley Olsen, Horticulture Program Coordinator*



Read more at: [go.illinois.edu/WinterLandscapeforWildlife](https://go.illinois.edu/WinterLandscapeforWildlife)

**Late blooms are imperative to the survival of our native pollinators!**

**Plant late-blooming natives like asters and goldenrods to provide nectar and pollen for pollinators preparing for winter.**

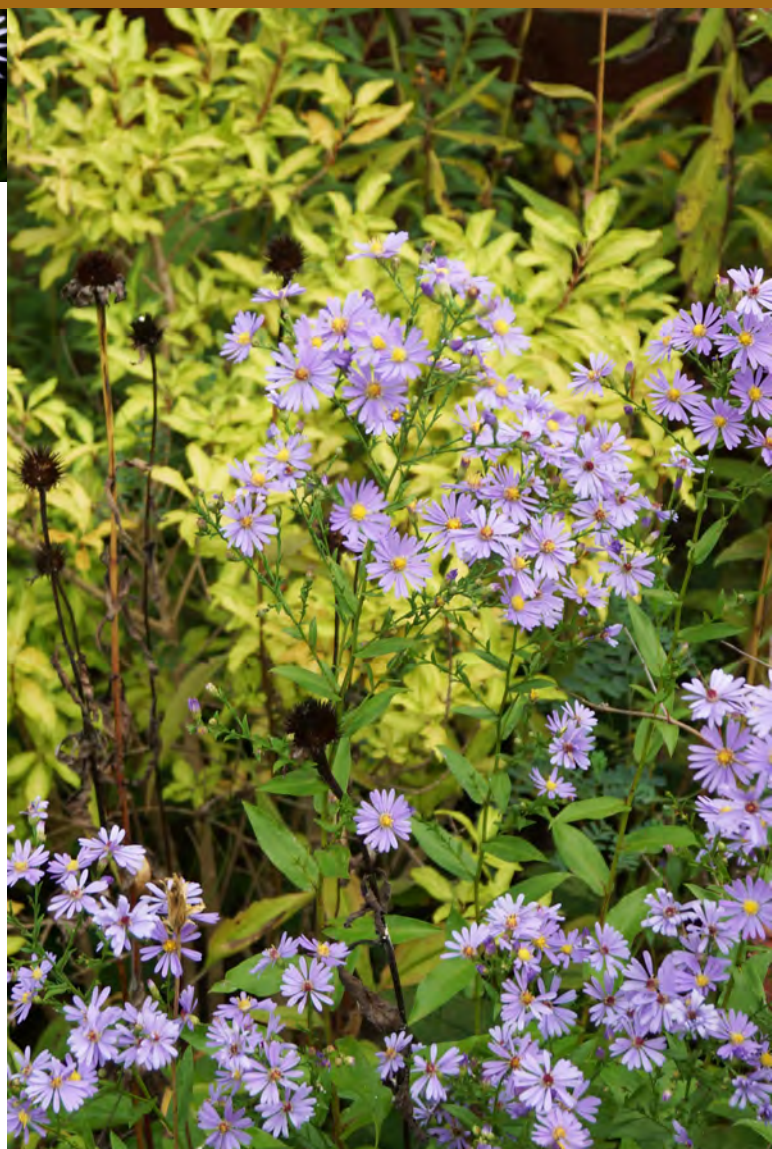
## Native Plant Spotlight: Smooth Blue Aster (*Symphyotrichum laeve*)



Smooth Blue Aster is an excellent native perennial choice for supporting pollinators in the garden. Blooming from late summer through fall (typically Sept. to Nov.), its lavender-to-purple flowers provide vital nectar and pollen at a time when many other plants have finished blooming. This timing makes it especially important for bees, butterflies, moths, flies, beetles, and wasps that need resources late in the season.

Beyond its role as a nectar plant, Smooth Blue Aster supports a variety of insects more broadly. Its flowers attract a wide suite of bees: bumblebees, leaf-cutter bees, syrphid flies, and even wasps. It's also used as a host plant for caterpillars, most notably the Pearl Crescent butterfly. It also provides dietary connections that extend beyond insects: small mammals like white-footed mice and gamebirds such as wild turkeys and ruffed grouse feed on its seeds. From a habitat design perspective, Smooth Blue Aster is very adaptable and makes a great addition to native plant landscapes. It grows well in both full sun and partial shade, and tolerates a range of soil moisture levels.

The plant reaches about 2 to 4 feet tall with erect, smooth stems and blue-green foliage, which holds up well in borders or mass plantings. Gardeners should note it can be susceptible to powdery mildew, especially in humid conditions, but generally requires low maintenance once established.



**Learn more at: [illinoispollinators.org/plant/smooth-blue-aster/](https://illinoispollinators.org/plant/smooth-blue-aster/)**

# Protect Your Trees this Winter!



As winter approaches, trees and shrubs become critical sources of food and shelter for wildlife. Without protection, these plants can be damaged by rabbits, deer, mice, and voles, which feed on bark, twigs, and roots when other food sources are scarce. Damage to the living layers beneath the bark can impair water and nutrient transport, reduce structural integrity, and make trees more vulnerable to pests and disease.

Rabbits, mice, voles, and deer all alter their diets in the dormant season, increasing the risk of damage to woody plants. Deer may also rub their antlers on trees, breaking limbs and stripping bark.

Understanding these behaviors is key to preventing long-term harm and maintaining healthy trees and shrubs throughout the winter.

Prevention is the most effective strategy. Fencing, tree guards, and proper placement of barriers can protect plants from animal damage, while removing mulch and habitat for rodents reduces the risk of overwintering pests. Regular checks during winter and timely removal of protective materials in spring ensure trees remain safe and healthy, and providing adequate hydration before the ground freezes helps minimize stress during dormancy.

**Read the full Good Growing article with all the tips and tricks at [go.illinois.edu/WinterWildlifeTreeBattle](https://go.illinois.edu/WinterWildlifeTreeBattle)**

# New Conservation@Home Members



**Marcia McCann**



**Steve Burch**

## Now that your yard is certified

An attractive and functional yard that conserves water and provides habitat for birds, butterflies and other beneficial wildlife deserves some recognition! Your certified yard is an environmentally-friendly landscape through the Conservation@Home program and you have a sign to post proudly. When your neighbors see your sign and get curious, they will want to know how they can get a sign like that. Before you know it, yard by yard, you've brought more nature to your neighborhood.

We would love to see the Conservation@Home sign in your yard. Place your sign in a visible place on a t-post or sturdy wooden stake then get a picture. If you need assistance with getting your sign posted, please let us know. Once you have your picture, we would love it if you would send it our way (email is usually the best and easiest way).

## *Save the Date!*



## 2026 Garden Tour Fulton County

**Saturday, August 22 ~ 10am to 2pm**

Certified C@H properties located in Fulton County are encouraged to sign up to be a stop on our 2026 Conservation@Home Garden Tour! If you are interested in being a host garden to encourage others to be ecologically-minded with their own landscape, then this is the volunteer opportunity for you!

Contact Ainsley Olsen at [ainsleyo@illinois.edu](mailto:ainsleyo@illinois.edu) to

sign up for more information. Host spots are limited, sign up early!

This will be a self-guided tour where participants will be going to different C@H Certified yards at their own pace. All gardens on the 2026 tour need to be located in Fulton County. Locations will only be sent out to registered attendees.

# Conservation@Home Evaluator Training 2026

**Master Volunteers who are looking to certify as an evaluator can join us for continuing education.**

Master Volunteers can help their community become part of a conservation movement! Join our Conservation@Home Evaluator training and learn how to assess yards for native gardening, habitat, and sustainability. Use your expertise to guide others in making meaningful environmental impacts. As a certified evaluator, you'll play a vital role in building greener, more resilient communities through the Extension program.

## **Zoom Training:**

Thursday, February 12, 2026

1pm



[go.illinois.edu/EvaluatorTraining26](https://go.illinois.edu/EvaluatorTraining26)

## **In-Person Training:**

Thursday, February 19, 2026

5:30pm

Illinois Extension, Tazewell County  
1505 Valle Vista Blvd, Pekin, IL 61554

## **Open to sharing your conservation journey?**

Let us know you are able to educate and inspire by emailing [ainsleyo@illinois.edu](mailto:ainsleyo@illinois.edu) and we'll get you on the path to being our next Member Spotlight!

## **2026 Core Volunteer Trainings:**

### **Speaker's Network**

Master Volunteers are invited to join our Speakers Bureau training to develop confidence and skills in public education. This short session will prepare you to present on a variety of Extension topics and represent our program in the community. Come learn, connect, and step into a new leadership role!

#### **Zoom Training:**

Thursday, January 15, 2026

1pm



[go.illinois.edu/SpeakersNetworkTraining26](https://go.illinois.edu/SpeakersNetworkTraining26)

#### **In-Person Training:**

Thursday, January 22, 2026

5:30pm

Illinois Extension, Peoria County  
4810 N Sheridan Rd, Peoria, IL 61614

### **Garden & Natural Resource Helpline**

Want to help more people grow gardens or preserve natural spaces? Join our Garden & Natural Resources Helpline training and learn how to field plant-clinic calls, diagnose garden issues, and guide folks with research-backed advice. Be the friendly, knowledgeable voice our community turns to when they need horticulture help or conservation concerns!

#### **Zoom Training:**

Thursday, January 29, 2026

1pm



[go.illinois.edu/HelplineTraining26](https://go.illinois.edu/HelplineTraining26)

#### **In-Person Training:**

Thursday, February 5, 2026

5:30pm

Illinois Extension, Fulton County  
15411 IL-100, Lewistown, IL 61542

# Everyday Environment: Extension Series Highlight



## An unexpected turn: the human dimensions of wildlife

Illinois wildlife tells a deeper story—one about shared spaces, shared health, and our own connection to the natural world. From coyotes and armadillos to bison and hatchery-raised fish, these species reveal how closely people and wildlife shape one another. Explore the surprising ways conservation, community, and everyday life intersect across our state.



**Read the full blog article here:**  
**[go.illinois.edu/EverydayEnvironmentUnexpectedTurn](https://go.illinois.edu/EverydayEnvironmentUnexpectedTurn)**

## Other Wildlife Management practices to consider:

~Old fruit, unsecured trash, spilled birdseed, and pet food attract raccoons, opossums, coyotes, and rodents. Regular cleanup reduces unwanted wildlife visitors and discourages habituation.

~Loose soffits, uncapped chimneys, gaps around vents, and deteriorating foundations create easy nesting spots for bats, squirrels, and birds. A yearly “wildlife audit” of the home exterior prevents surprise roommates. Instead, provide

~Tall grass, brush piles, and unmanaged woodpiles provide excellent cover for small mammals and snakes. Strategic trimming and relocating brush farther from the house reduces the likelihood of conflict.

~Feeders that are overfilled or placed too close to the house invite squirrels, raccoons, bears (in some regions), and window-strike-prone songbirds. Cleaning feeders regularly and placing them thoughtfully supports birds while reducing hazards.

~Bright, unattended nighttime lighting disrupts nocturnal animals, affects migration, and increases predator-prey imbalance. Motion-sensor or shielded lighting protects wildlife while enhancing home security.

~Backyard water features, birdbaths, or ponds can become mosquito breeding sites or attract animals to unsafe areas if not maintained. Regular cleaning and using circulating water keeps these features healthy and wildlife-friendly. Make sure it doesn't freeze or wildlife can't get access.

# Upcoming Events

## Green Connections Year-End Gathering

**Tuesday, December 9, 2025**

**5:30pm**

**Peoria Zoo**

**2320 N Prospect Rd, Peoria, IL 61603**

Everyone is invited to the Illinois Green Connections Year-End Celebration! This will be a time to enjoy each other's company and rejoice over the accomplishments and experiences of 2025. **This is a potluck dinner, please bring a dish to share!**

~Door prizes, games, photo booth and more!

**Festive Sweater Parade: Wear fun and fabulous holiday attire to show off for our friends and family!**

**Toy Drive: Toys for Tots**

If you are feeling extra generous this year, please bring a new & unwrapped toy to be donated to the Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots. If you are unable to be in attendance and still want to donate, dropoffs are accepted unto 12/10 at Alpha Park Library.

### Greater Peoria Farm Show

**December, 2, 3, 4, 2025 - 9am to 3pm**

Three days of the latest in agricultural innovation

To volunteer, email [nflower2@illinois.edu](mailto:nflower2@illinois.edu)

Peoria Civic Center

201 SW Jefferson Ave, Peoria, IL 61602

### Design-on-a-Pine: Holiday Floral Workshop

**Monday, December 15, 2025 - 1pm**

Registration required. Cost \$15

[go.illinois.edu/HolidayFloral25](https://go.illinois.edu/HolidayFloral25)

Illinois Extension, Fulton County

15411 IL-100, Lewistown, IL 61542



### Winter Tree ID Hike

**December 17, 2025 - 10am**

Explore the beauty of bare trees and sharpen your ID skills

Spring Creek Preserve

Access off Spring Creek Rd, Washington, IL 61571

### Conservation@Home Winter Sowing Workshop

**February 10, 2026 - 5:30pm**

Learn how to start native plants outdoors in the cold, bring your own container!

Illinois Extension, Peoria County

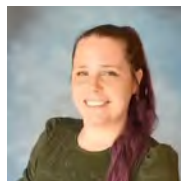
4810 N. Sheridan Rd. Peoria, IL 61614



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