

How-to  
guide

# Stewarding your container garden for wildlife



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# Stewarding your container garden for wildlife

After your native plants have been planted continue to maintain and steward your container garden habitat throughout the seasons to enhance its value for wildlife. Fortunately, native plants are hardy and easy to keep going! Even so, these tips for successful stewardship may come in handy.

## Grow it to know it

Think of each growing season as a learning opportunity. Over time, some plant species are likely to do well while others may not. Year after year, your knowledge of the plant species that thrive in your space will grow. Much of what you have to learn on this journey can only be gained through hands-on experience, so keep experimenting! Apply what you learn to create healthier, more diverse habitats over time.

## Steward through the seasons

Here are some suggested stewardship activities to you can do each season to keep your plants healthy and enhance their value for wildlife:



### Collect/scatter seeds

Fall is the best season to grow native plants from seeds. Hand rake any bare soil to loosen the top layer, scatter your seeds thinly over the soil and press down to loosely pack the soil. The seeds will germinate the following spring.



### Fertilize

Spread a small amount (about one litre per square metre) of your solid fertilizer on your container garden. Use a hand rake to mix the fertilizer into the top 10 centimetres of soil. If you notice any weeds, use the hand rake to pull them out by the root and mix them into the top layer of soil. This is known as “turning under” the weeds and will help fertilize the soil. Avoid raking any existing native plants or sprouting seedlings if present in your container garden.



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## Mulch

Dried leaves make for a perfect protective layer (leaf mulch) for your plants during winter. Take fallen leaves and pile them around your plants to create a 15–30 centimetre-deep layer. Leaving dried plant stems in the container garden also provides homes for insects, including native bees.



## Protect

Bring your container garden into a cold garage or shed or wrap them in a tarp, stuffing gaps with dry leaves to create an insulated cushion layer.



## Weed

Generally, shallow-rooted plants or those that grow quickly in the spring or fall are likely weeds. Remove and compost. If you're not sure what something is, leave it, take a picture and ask a garden expert.

## What is a weed?

“Weed” is a word that gardeners use to refer to plants that they don't want to be there.

Invasive species are non-native plants that aggressively spread and cause damage. Some, like garlic mustard, produce chemicals that prevent other plants from growing nearby. Refer to the [Invasive Species Centre](#) for instructions on how to safely manage invasive species. Be sure of the identity of a plant before pulling it and try to find a use for it. For example, each spring you could make garlic mustard pesto.

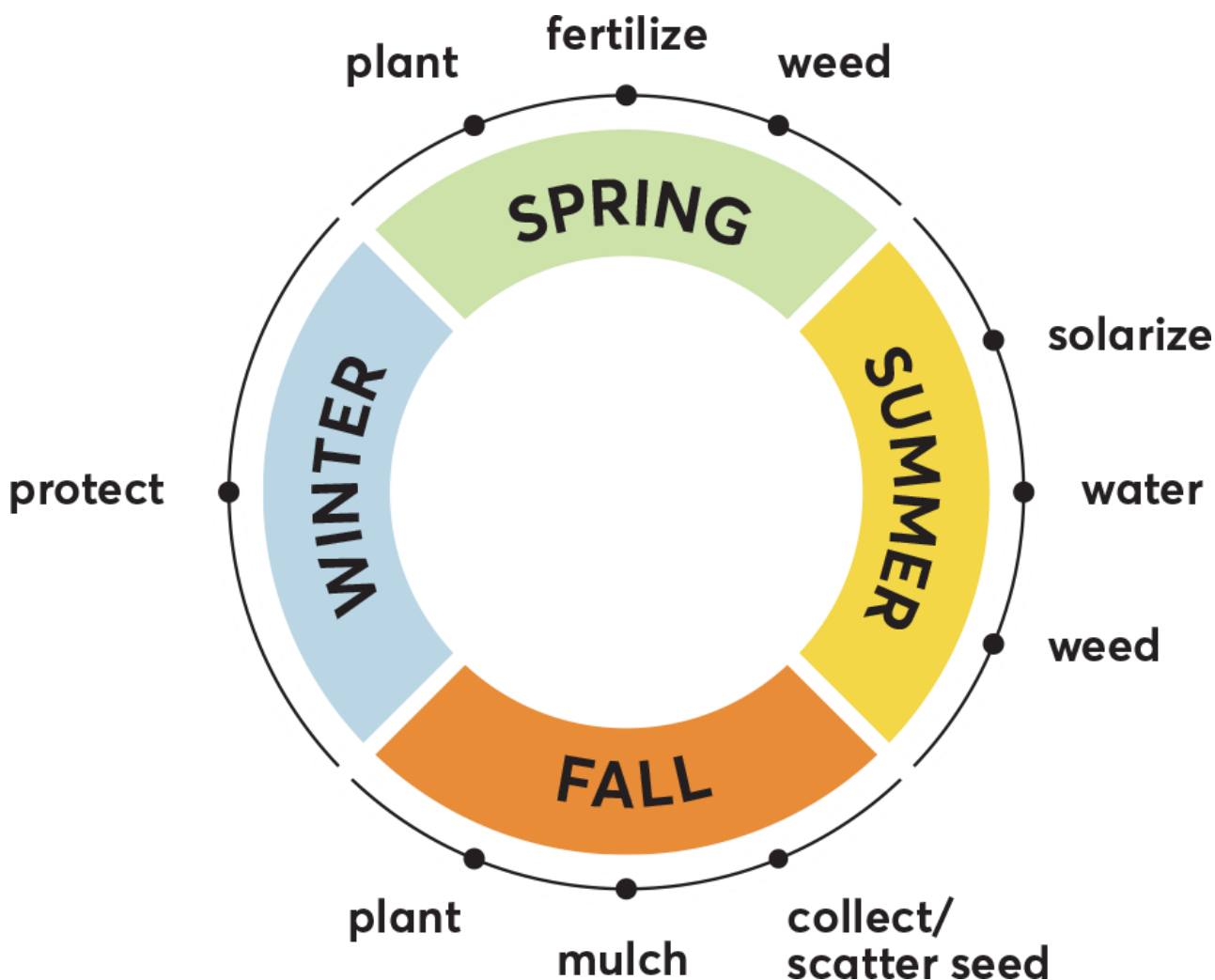
Some plants that pop up in your garden of their own accord may in fact be native plants. This is another reason to check the species before pulling them out. For example, that “weed” might just be a native milkweed that provides food for a variety of insects.



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## Four-season stewardship calendar

The wheel below shows what your container garden needs in each of the four seasons. The timing of these activities will vary from year to year and will depend on your regional conditions.



*Information on stewardship activities was adapted from the In the Zone Four Seasons of Wildlife Gardening guide*



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## Let nature do the work

Since native plants have been living and evolving in your area for thousands of years, they are well-adapted to surviving in your local conditions. Many of the gardening tasks that help keep exotic plant species alive are not required for native plants. If you are striving for a naturalized outdoor space that provides habitat for wildlife, you can largely sit back and let nature do the work. Some ideas include:

- Don't trim off flower heads once they finish blooming. Let them go to seed so that you can collect some seeds and leave the rest as food for wildlife.
- In fall, leave dead stems, leaves, and seed heads where they are — don't throw them away as yard waste! They provide important food and shelter for wildlife over the winter.
- If you give them room to grow, native plants will usually expand their populations by seeding themselves.

Interested in planting a larger space or planting on campus?

- Talk to your campus grounds team about leaving leaf litter and some decaying wood to help the ground retain moisture and attract interesting wildlife. You may be surprised to find native plants take root, assisted by wildlife. If planting at home or in the community, ensure everyone is on board with leaving the leaves.
- Try a no-mow area around trees to see what grows naturally. Remove invasive plants and nurture native plants.
- Let low areas stay naturally wet and let pools dry up naturally in the summer. Some wildlife prefer these seasonally-wet places to complete their lifecycle.
- Reduce pruning where trees have room to grow and are not a hazard. More diverse structures can accommodate more wildlife. One situation where you would want to prune is when two branches are growing so close together that they're rubbing against each other; prune off one of these branches to prevent a wound from forming on the bark.

*'Let nature do the work' section was adapted from the In the Zone Woodland and Wildflower garden guides.*