



# Living With Natural Areas

## a guide for homeowners

### Is this information for me?

Natural areas are valuable features of our communities' parks and open spaces. Many citizens, however, may not be aware of these local treasures and the need to protect them. What can you do - whether as a property owner or as someone out to enjoy the scenery and get some exercise - to minimize your impact on natural areas? This brochure answers that question. First, it provides guidelines for those of us who live near natural areas, outlining ways to make the spillover impact from our properties more positive. Next, a "code of behaviour" describes what activities are appropriate in a natural area. The last section lists sources where more information can be obtained.



### What is a natural area?

Natural areas include wetlands, meadows, woodlots, valley lands and other relatively undisturbed lands that are home to many different plants and wildlife. Natural areas also include the green spaces and stormwater management ponds found in many new developments.

Some natural areas contain rare plants, wildlife or landforms, or have features characteristic of the region before European settlement, or are especially large or diverse in habitat. Many natural areas are considered environmentally significant on a local, regional, provincial or even national scale.

Many municipalities are working to preserve local natural areas. Settlement and development have destroyed much natural vegetation and caused some types of habitat to disappear completely. Often, natural areas contain the only remaining large sections of forest or wetland. They help us to learn about nature, provide clues to the current health of our environment, and add to our quality of life.

### Around your home - having a positive impact

The properties that surround natural areas were once part of a wild landscape. Some yards still have remnants of particular habitat types, such as wet areas along the edge of a wetland. As development moves closer to natural areas, trees and other plants that were once in the middle of woodlands or wetlands, shielded by forests, are now exposed.

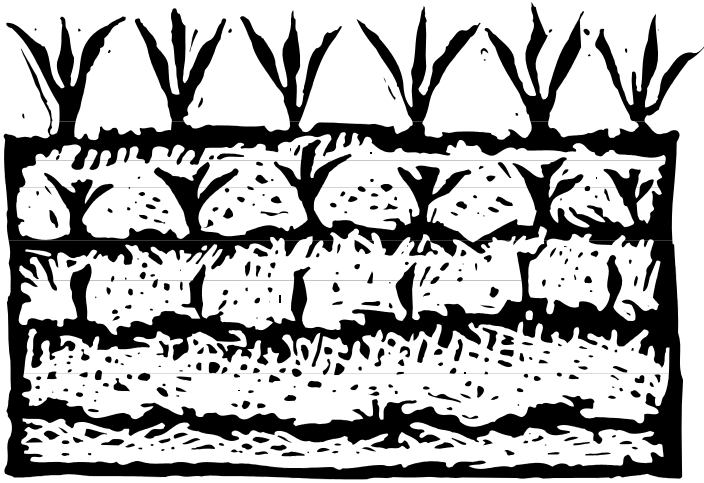
Because urban development sits on the doorstep of many natural areas, what is done in neighbouring yards is critical to their health. Here are some ideas to help home owners to ensure that their activities can help neighbouring natural areas and enhance their yards at the same time.



### What about encroachment into natural areas?

Thanks to people who recognize their property limits! If a lawn is mowed past property boundaries into a natural area, the rich habitat is replaced by a manicured lawn and the original diversity is reduced. The cumulative impact of dozens, even hundreds of landowners cutting into the edges of natural areas threatens their integrity.

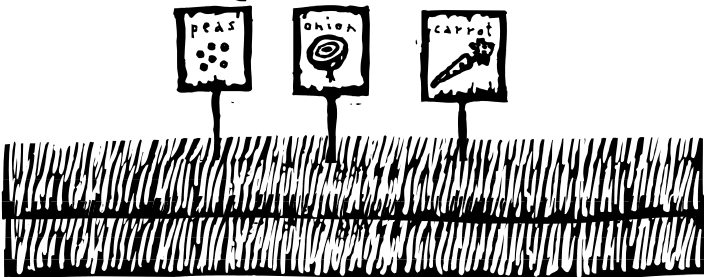
Encroaching past private lot lines into municipal parkland or open space is not permitted and may result in legal proceedings. Call your municipality for more information.



### Can I dump my yard & garden waste in a natural area?

Dumped yard waste is bad news for any natural area. Dumped material smothers natural vegetation, may contain harmful chemicals, and often has plant seeds not found normally in the wild. If these materials are dumped in a natural area, the introduced seeds may grow where they fall. Native plants and the wildlife that depends on are constantly under threat from invading non-native plants.

Your local municipality has by-laws concerning dumping waste. For more serious offences, charges can be laid under the Provincial Offences Act, with fines of up to \$5000. Call your municipality if you have concerns about waste being dumped illegally.

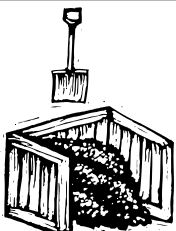


### What should I do with yard & garden waste?

The best solution is to reduce and recycle as much as possible, by composting leaves, grass clippings, weeds and other materials on your own property. You reduce the amount of garbage going to landfills and create rich soil for your lawn and garden. If you can't use all your grass clippings, leaves and brush, ask your neighbours if they need more material for their home composters. Alternatively, put your yard waste out for curbside collection, or drop it off at London's Yard Waste Depots.

If you employ a professional gardener, check that proper disposal practices are followed. Reputable commercial gardeners are well aware of the City's yard waste regulations.

If you are having home composting problems, such as visits from unwanted wildlife, call the Rot Line (operated by the Thames Region Ecological Association, or TREA) at 519-672-5991 for free advice.



### Is it okay to use lawn and garden chemicals?

Remember that, just as water landing on your property doesn't always stay there, neither may all the chemicals that you put on your lawn, garden or driveway. If your property drains into a natural area, any chemical that you use can be carried by water into that area. By adopting an environmentally friendly approach to yard maintenance, you will enhance both your yard and the natural area beyond.



Here are some tips to follow:

- Add compost to your lawn to fertilize it.
- Use a mulching lawnmower to return nutrients to your lawn.
- Cut your lawn at a high setting to reduce weed growth and retain moisture.
- Water grass early in the morning and allow it to dry out between waterings.
- Use alternative native ground covers in shaded areas.
- If you live next to a natural area, consider creating a buffer strip (up to 5 metres wide) on your property. Plant native shrubs and trees in the buffer to reduce the spillover effect.
- Investigate non-toxic alternatives to chemicals for control of pests, weeds and plant diseases.
- If you have to use pesticides, read the product labels carefully and use only as directed. Dispose of household and pool chemicals safely.



Did you know that, in general, approximately 10 times more pesticides are applied by city home owners than are used by farmers on an equal area of farm land?

### Does it matter what I grow in my garden?

Alien alert! Be careful when growing plants that are not native to Southern Ontario. Plants don't recognize property boundaries and can spread easily from gardens to natural areas. Many alien species do not have natural predators here and are extremely invasive. For example, the beautiful European import called Purple Loosestrife is flourishing across North America, invading wetlands and out-competing native plants. As a result, plant diversity is reduced and fewer places remain where native wildlife can survive.

Other common species that out-compete native plants are Norway Maple, Periwinkle, and Goutweed (Goat's Foot). Check with your local nursery to find out which plants are native to your region before purchasing. Native plants are better adapted to the climate, soil conditions, insects and diseases of this area.



Many municipalities or counties have information on plants that are suitable for use near natural areas and which plants to avoid.

## Can I attract wildlife to my yard?

Habitat loss is the number one threat to wildlife today. With time and careful planning, you can create habitat in your back yard and provide a safe haven for many species to visit. Wildlife will be attracted by food, water and shelter, but these elements must be arranged so that birds and animals are not exposed to danger. Cats can have a major impact on bird and animal populations. Keeping your cat indoors from May to July will reduce its impact on nesting birds and small animals. Squirrels drawn to birdfeeders will also eat eggs and nestlings.



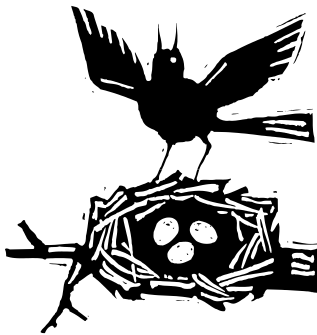
A natural area can be a great source of scenic beauty and pleasure. These areas may also be home to insects, such as mosquitoes, that are an important link in the food chain. Suitable clothing and insect repellents will help you avoid becoming part of the chain.



## Stepping out in a natural area - "Take only memories, leave only footprints"

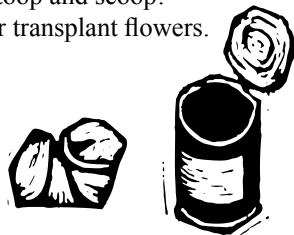


Many natural areas are accessible to the public. Local significant areas may contain rare and endangered plants and animals, unique landforms, and habitats that are prized for their high quality and diversity. However, the very features that make them precious are also those that could be easily damaged by thoughtless actions. Most damage occurs when people leave the marked trails and trample vegetation. By following the guidelines below, you can enjoy these natural areas without harming them, and leave them in a healthy state for their "residents" and future visitors.



### Rules to remember in a natural area

- Please use the official access points and managed trails. Don't create or use trails that originate in people's backyards, as these additional trails cause more widespread trampling and disturbance of wildlife and plants.
- Avoid walking in natural areas when the trails are muddy, such as in the early spring or after a heavy rainfall. More vegetation gets trampled when people have to walk around mudholes.
- Please respect signs indicating that bicycles are not permitted in a natural area.
- Keep natural areas litter free.
- Keep dogs leashed. Cats and dogs are hunters by nature. If allowed to run loose, they put great stress on or kill birds and small animals. Don't forget to stoop and scoop!
- Do not disturb wildlife or pick or transplant flowers.



### Can I take anything from a natural area?

Natural areas are often the only wild place remaining for rare native wildflowers to grow. These plants may have complicated life cycles or need seeds from existing flowers to regenerate the next year. Removing even a few plants can jeopardize the remaining population. Some garden centres stock a wide variety of native plants, trees and shrubs. These have a much better chance of surviving in your yard as they have been raised under similar soil and light conditions.

It is tempting to pick plants for food or herbal remedies, but this practice, just like transplanting, is not appropriate or sustainable. Even a few people picking plants can put the local population of that species in danger. Besides, those plants have a more important role in the natural environment than as food or medicine for humans!

A natural area is no place to find firewood or lawn decorations. Taking dead wood from a natural area will hurt that area's health in the long-term. As wood decays, it contributes nutrients to the soil and provides food and shelter for thousands of tiny organisms. In addition, new growth often depends on old stumps and logs. Cutting trees and brush destroys habitat, tramples vegetation and disturbs wildlife.

Enjoy wildlife when you discover it, but leave it in its natural setting. Don't make survival harder by taking animals out of their homes, leaving fewer behind to carry on. It is impossible to give a wild animal the proper care and nutrition to keep it healthy and happy. Also, it is illegal to keep wild animals, even injured ones, in captivity without a permit.

You can help out the local naturalist and trail groups that regularly remove litter from the natural areas. Pick up any litter that you find and dispose of it properly, and, of course, don't leave any more behind!





### Beware!

If you encounter a plant with three shiny green leaflets, leave it alone! You may have found poison ivy, which is abundant in many natural areas. Many people get nasty rashes from the sap of this plant, whether from direct contact with the leaves, roots and stems or from touching pets or equipment that have the sap on them. Remember, though, that poison ivy is part of the food chain, growing berries that are edible for birds and animals. Learn to recognize and avoid it, rather than trying to get rid of it. Poison ivy is usually found in partial shade as a knee-high ground cover, but can also grow as a vine up tree trunks. “Leaflets three, let it be!”

### Deer, Deer!

If you are bothered by deer foraging in your backyard, here are some suggestions to protect your garden.

*Make your garden unpalatable* - Garden centres and the Internet are good sources of information on “deer proof plants.” Beebalm, bleeding heart, butterfly bush, cone flower, foxglove and rhododendron are among the plants that deer don’t like eating.

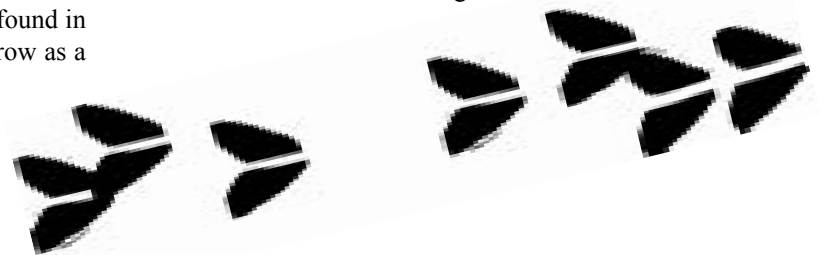
*Make the fringes unpalatable* - Surround your property with unpalatable and repellent native plants, and the deer may decide to forage elsewhere. Cedar and yew are delicacies for deer and should be avoided. White spruce, tamarack and juniper are good substitutes as deer will avoid them.

*Block the view* - Deer want an unobstructed view to see approaching predators and do not like to venture past anything that they cannot see through or over. A trellis covered in vines may discourage them.

*Block the landing sites* - Deer will not jump into your yard if they cannot see where they will land. Wooden fences or lattices that obstruct their view are a good deterrent.

*Tidy up* - Pick fruit such as apples and pears as they ripen, and remove or till under plants in the vegetable garden after harvest.

*Fence them out* - Specific trees or beds can be protected with mesh or screen. The barriers should be at least two metres high and at least half a metre from the foliage.



## Where can I find out more?

### More information on being a good natural neighbour:

- For composting tips call the “Rot Line” at 519-672-5991. This free service is offered to the public by the Thames Region Ecological Association (TREA).
- *Backyard Habitats* (pamphlet) and *Natural Invaders* (booklet). Available from the Federation of Ontario Naturalists at 1-800-440-2366, [www.ontarionature.org](http://www.ontarionature.org)
- Johnson, Lorraine, 1995. *The Ontario Naturalized Garden*. Whitecap Books, Toronto, Ontario.
- Ministry of Natural Resources, 1990. *Landscaping for Wildlife*. Queen’s Printer for Ontario, Ontario.
- Rubin, Carole, 1989. *How to Get your Lawn & Garden off Drugs*. Friends of the Earth, Ottawa, Ontario.

This brochure was published in 2005 by the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority, and based on *Living with Natural Areas - A Guide for Citizens of London*, originally produced by the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority, the City of London’s Ecological and Environmental Planning Advisory Committee, and Celebrate the Thames.

UPPER THAMES RIVER

CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

*Inspiring a healthy environment*

1424 Clarke Road, London, Ontario N5V 5B9  
519-451-2800 [www.thamesriver.on.ca](http://www.thamesriver.on.ca)