

## Create a “Herp” Friendly Landscape

By Ray Bosmans, Professor Emeritus, Univ. of MD. & MATTS President

---

What is a Herp? Herp is short for Herptile which is a name that includes reptiles and amphibians. These amazing animals are a modern-day throwback to the age of dinosaurs. Reptiles and amphibians are remarkably successful to have survived essentially unchanged since the dawn of time. They are found in almost every part of the world and most have adapted to many challenges, the biggest of which are the impacts (mostly harmful) caused by humans.

The mid-Atlantic region has a rich diversity of turtles, snakes, lizards, salamanders, frogs and toads. They all play an important role in nature. They eat pests such as rodents (primarily the snakes); others feed on harmful insects, slugs and other destructive plant pests; and many are also food for other animals. Aside from their role in the balance of nature, they are an “indicator species” of environmental quality. Reptiles and amphibians are very sensitive to pollutants in the landscape. Their presence in your backyard is a good indicator of a healthy environment.

Herps in our region are increasingly threatened by widespread habitat destruction, pollution, and road kills.

### **Landscape care tips to protect reptiles and amphibians:**

#### **Limit the use of traditional insecticides**

Use them only when absolutely needed and apply them only on the target plants. Whenever possible use bio-rational insecticides such as insecticidal soap, horticultural oil and biologicals. Plant native plants that are more insect and disease hardy than many imported plants.

#### **Limit the use of lawn weed killers.**

Keep your lawn mowed at the proper height of 2-3 inches for cool season grasses. This will discourage weeds from invading. Hand dig or spot treat weedy patches with a labeled weed killer. Do not spray the entire lawn if weeds are only patchy.

#### **Avoid mowing your lawn in the late evening or at night.**

Many species of reptiles and amphibians are actively moving through the lawn at night. Turtles are usually not very active at night except during the egg-laying season of early summer. Whether you mow with a push or riding mower always be on the look-out for turtles, snakes and toads.

Box turtles are a very common victim of lawn mower injuries.

#### **Install an aquatic garden**

It does not need to be large. They are not too difficult to make, (except for the digging). Planted with beautiful water lilies an aquatic garden will bring you great enjoyment. It also will provide a refuge for frogs and toads to lay their eggs, a place for a box turtle to drink and wade. Be sure there are several easy places for a turtle to climb out, or else they may drown.

## Create a “Herp” Friendly Landscape (cont.)

### **Provide cover for reptiles and amphibians to hide.**

Develop more of your lawn into beautiful perennial flower beds, ground covers or shrubs. An open lawn does not provide the needed protection for these small animals to feel safe and secure. These animals are rather low on the food chain and need a safe place to hide!

### **Leave a place in your yard a little “wild”.**

The entire home landscape does not need to be so manicured. Leave an area of wild growth, piles of leaves or branches also provide places to hide and to hibernate over the winter.

### **Be on the lookout for turtles and snakes crossing the road.**

So many are killed by drivers who either do not see them or simply don't care. (some drivers even aim for them). It seems that a glass bottle has a better chance of surviving than a poor turtle simply trying to get across. If safe, pull over and move the turtle across the road in the direction it was headed. Although a box turtle is very cute, resist taking it home as a pet.

### **Learn more about these fascinating creatures.**

Snakes are the least understood or appreciated reptile. Too many have fallen victim to the shovel. Fortunately, today, less people kill them than years ago partly due to the many educational programs on TV and what children are now taught about reptiles in school.

### **The Law and Herps:**

All native reptiles and amphibians are protected in Maryland and in neighboring states. It is illegal to willfully kill a snake or any other reptile.

Hopefully, by making a few improvements you can create a landscape that sustains good environmental quality for Herps.

*I have a really cute story that's related to Ray's excellent article. My husband has a small backyard vegetable garden, for which he's very proud of, but something was eating his turnip greens. Our yard is totally fenced, and the fence is slightly below ground level so that not even bunnies can get into our yard. Curiosity got the best of us so we set up the havahart trap, just to see what it might be. It took only one day to catch the culprit, a large healthy box turtle! I would have never guessed I had a free roaming box turtle in my backyard, and I'm supposed to know turtles! The moral of this story is, we never really know what lurks in our yards, even in very urban areas! I would like to also point out, MATTs has seen numerous box turtle with injuries from string weeders and mower, so please, let's be watchful out there. — Stephanie Knykendall*