

HABITAT - the arrangement of food, water, cover, and space **-IS THE KEY**. This newsletter is a place to share ideas, information, and help answer some of your habitat and wildlife gardening concerns.

We want to hear from you! Letters, e-mail, photos, drawings. Let us know how successful you are as you create wildlife habitat on your property. Complete the online [Habichat Reader's Survey](#).

Write to Me!

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Native Plant Profile... Eastern Prickly Pear Cactus (*Opuntia humifusa*)



Common Names: Prickly pear, Indian Fig

Height: ½" to 1", primarily prostrate in form

General description: Flattened pads (Stems) are jointed and are sprawling in nature, Leaves are small, temporary and found at the edge of the flat wide pads. Bristles are found in tufts covering the pads. These spines are fewer in number compared to the western variety of this species.



Flowers: Flowers bloom from June to August. They are yellow in color, and sometimes have a reddish center. Blooms can be quite showy

Fruit: Fruit is purple to deep red in color, and pulpy.

Soil: Sandy, loamy also shale soils. Plant does not tolerate damp or rich soils.

Light: Prefers full sun, can tolerate slight shade

Temperature: This is a cold tolerant species.

Use by wildlife: Native bees, such as bumble bees will use the flowers for nectar; some use by butterflies for nectar. The fleshy fruits are consumed by raccoon and opossum.

Landscaping Notes: This is our only widespread eastern cactus. It is a Chesapeake Watershed Native found primarily in the coastal plain. It is evergreen. Its low growing meandering

shape makes it an interesting plant in xeric plantings and container planting. Reproduces from cactus pads stuck in the soil.

Important: Do not remove cactus from the wild. In many parts of the eastern U.S. Prickly Pear Cactus are small colonies that need protection from loss of habitat.

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Maryland Wildlife: Striped Skunk

(*Mephitis mephitis*)



General description:

- This well known omnivore is found over most of North America.
- A mammal known for its color, which is black with 2 white stripes on the back merging in a cap on the head and sometimes the shoulders.
- Stripes can vary in width and can occasionally be absent. It is not uncommon to have all black skunks.
- These creatures have a long bushy tail and a small triangle-shaped head, with small beady, black eyes.
- It is about the size of a house cat, and can weigh between 2 to 14 pounds. Males are larger than females.
- Skunks have short legs with webbed toes, with longer claws on the front legs to aid in digging for food. The paws have an excellent sense of touch.
- They have small rounded ears, but good hearing.
- Slow moving, skunks are good swimmers but not climbers.
- Mainly silent but can make soft growling, chattering and purring sounds.

Defense mechanism:

- Skunks have anal glands that hold about a tablespoon of musk composed of Methyl mercaptan.
- If threatened skunk will chatter, stamp front feet, arch tail over the back and turn the rump towards the predator, with the tail straight up and spray 10 to 15 feet.
- The odor can be smelled for a long distance.
- Fluid in the eyes of a predator can cause pain and temporary loss of sight.
- It is thought the striped skunk's coloration, being bold instead of camouflage, indicates to other animals to leave it alone.
- Interestingly, when male skunks fight they will not spray each other.

Predators:

Because of the spraying, skunks have few predators. The primary one is the Great Horned Owl which will take young ones by swooping on top of them before they have a chance to spray. However, owls have been reported to have the faint smell of skunk on them.

Reproduction:

- Skunks mate from mid- February to mid- March.
- The female gives birth 63 days later to 3 to 7 young with an average of 5 kits. She usually produces one litter per year.
- The male mates with as many females as possible and does not help with the care of the young.
- Young are born blind and naked, but with the characteristic black and white color pattern.
- At 6 to 7 weeks the young are weaned at about the same time they are able to spray if attacked.
- The young stay with the mother until the following year learning to hunt.

Food:

Being omnivores skunks will eat insects, spiders, eggs, a variety of vegetation, eggs and especially grubs. They feed on many lawn pests, especially in the fall, when you may find small circular holes throughout the lawn where they have been digging them up.

Habitat:

- Found in woodlands and suburbs.
- Like to use hollow logs and crevices.
- Do like to be close to a source of water.

Behavior:

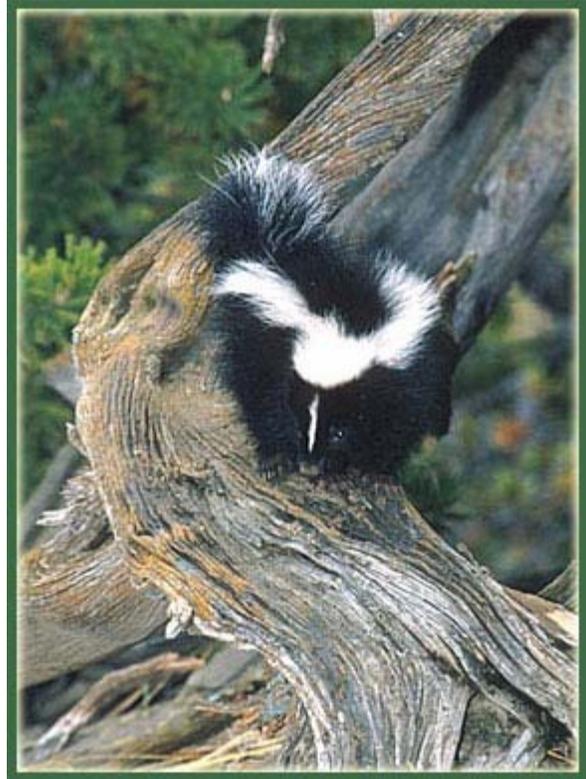
- Nocturnal, active year around, but will fatten up in the fall to be able to stay semi-dormant in harsh winter months.
- Skunks will use other animals' burrows, but can make their own.
- In the winter female skunks and their young will stay in a burrow together, sometimes with other females and their families.

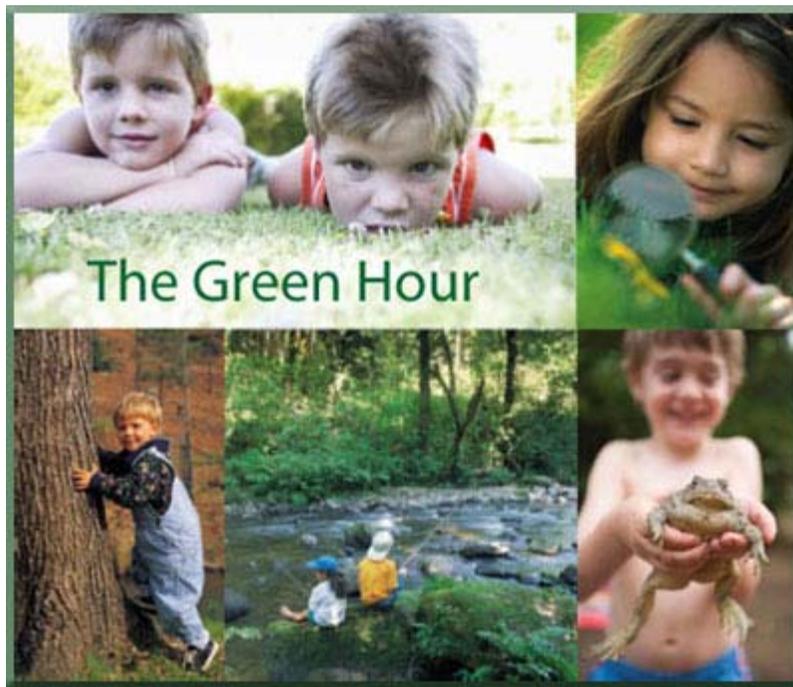
Similar species found in Maryland:

The eastern Spotted Skunk has been reported in eastern Allegheny County. This skunk is smaller and about the size of a squirrel. It is about 1 to 2 pounds in weight and 1 foot in length. This skunk is a good climber and sprays by turning its back, standing on its front feet and then spraying.

Did you know?

- Skunks are considered a control on insect populations.
- They are often called polecats.





The Green Hour for Children

Looking for another idea to involve your children in the outdoors? This one is inexpensive, can be done anytime of year and can involve all of the family. It is called the “Green Hour”, a term trade marked by the National Wildlife Federation, (NWF). What is it? It is taking one hour a day everyday and spending it outdoors, without a radio, or other electronic device.

The “Green Hour” can be one hour of unstructured play in the outdoors. Let the children just explore and enjoy nature on their own. It can be in the backyard, nearby woods or local park. Studies have shown that allowing for time to just explore nature improves imaginations and attention spans.

There may be “Green Hours” where you might want to do some informal activities. Some ideas for this are fishing, looking for insects, making and watching what comes to a bird feeder, planting and tending a small wildlife garden, looking at clouds or taking a hike. The Wild Acres site has sections on animal tracking, making bird feeders and other similar activities that you can adapt to your child’s age and interest.

The National Wildlife Federation has a web site devoted to the “Green Hour” at www.Greenhour.org . This site serves a forum for people to share ideas about what they have been doing that works and is fun.

If you would like to share what is working for you to get your children outside and involved with helping you create a “Wild Acres,” we would enjoy hearing from you! Contact us directly at mmause@dnr.state.md.us

Xeriscaping



"Xeri" means dry and "scape" is view.

This term, xeriscaping, was coined by the Denver Water Department in 1978. The term means plantings that do not require supplemental irrigation.

Does it mean using sand and desert plants?

No, it depends on the climate what you will use to create a water conserving landscape. You are using drought tolerant landscaping. Native plants will be good choices to use, as they have evolved to withstand the varying precipitation cycles of your climate, plus they provide food and cover for wildlife.

Suggestions:

- Group plants with similar water requirements together.
- Pick drought-tolerant species.
- If possible channel water to the site, such as the runoff from a rain spout.
- Use soak irrigation; use soak hoses instead of sprinklers.
- Mulch the site.
- Prune when necessary.
- Fertilize only when needed. Slow release types are preferred.



Following these suggestions will produce:

- Lower water bills
- Less work
- Less use of gasoline for mowing and trimming

Here are some suggestions for plantings in Maryland

Flowers	Trees and Shrubs
Native asters	Bay Berry
Purple Cone flowers	Dogwoods
Black-eyed Susans	Sassafras
Sedums	Witch Hazel
Phlox species	

If you enjoyed this issue of Habichat, you might want to check out our online back issues and clickable listing of Habichat articles.
<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/wildlife/wildacres.asp#habichat>

Acknowledgements:

- Photograph of Prickly Pear Cactus amidst ferns, courtesy of Thomas G. Barnes, University of Kentucky
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- Photograph of Striped Skunk in grass (also used in header artwork), courtesy of Erwin C. Nielsen/Painet Inc., Illinois Department of Natural Resources.
- Photograph of baby skunk in tree, courtesy of Robert Barber/Painet Inc., Illinois Department of Natural Resources.
- Collage for The Green Hour: Photos courtesy of Microsoft Clip Art and Media.
- Photograph of xeriscape planting at edge of sidewalk, courtesy of Chesapeake Ecology Center in Annapolis, Md. (www.ChesapeakeEcologyCenter.org)
- Photograph of xeriscape planting in front of building, courtesy of Kerry Johnson, PhD., Area Horticulturist, MSU Extension Service, Mississippi Gardens Newspaper and Web Column - May 17, 2004, Mississippi State University

In an effort to continue to provide quality backyard habitat information we are asking our readers to tell us what you think. Please take a few minutes to answer our survey. This will help us to improve our site so we can continue to deliver the information you want.

[Habichat Reader's Survey](#)

For Additional Information, Contact:

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