

GARDENING

Planning a Wildlife Garden

by Judith Buhrman

Planning a landscape for wildlife, whether a whole yard or fifty square feet, means simply identifying the creatures you want to attract, analyzing your present landscape, and designing your new one to meet the needs of your desired "tenants".

Be realistic in your expectations. If the creatures you wish to attract have special needs you cannot fill or that are not found in your area, you won't get these creatures no matter what you do. Keep wintering birds in mind if you do your plan when they are not around. Part of the fun in planning is observation to learn what wildlife is in the neighborhood that might be induced to settle down. This may entail purchasing or borrowing a couple of field guides and binoculars (you can get a good pair of binoculars for under \$100).

Make a scaled drawing of your present landscape, noting structures, sidewalks and driveways, power lines, trees and other plantings, slopes, runoff pathways, areas of perpetual sun or shade, and compass orientation. Decide what, if anything, is to be removed. Make several copies so you can play with alternate designs.

Do a soil test, and a drainage test if you are not familiar with your yard's characteristics. Learn what plant community existed before development — in most cases, that will give you most of your plant palette.

Decide how you will provide water for wildlife. If you want something more elaborate than a simple birdbath on the ground, now is the time to plan it.

Now you can select your plants — keeping in mind the principles of biological, structural, and temporal diversity — to match the needs of wildlife for food, cover, and water within the constraints of your site.

Please yourself with your design, and put features such as brush and compost piles out of public view. Look at your design from inside your home as well as outside. Think about maintenance now, in the design phase. The plan should reflect the mature size of the plants you select, or you will be doing a lot of pruning and digging up. Think curves. They are pleasing to the eye, and give more "edge".

Also, know your local landscape code.

A thoughtfully planned wildlife landscape, vibrant with song and motion and color all the year-round, will reward you with delightful surprises and deep personal satisfaction.

Judith Buhrman has been a member of FNPS since 1988 and was the founding president of Pinellas Chapter. She is an occasional contributor to The Palmetto and is a regular columnist for the St. Petersburg Audubon Society newsletter.