Selecting Food Plants For Wildlife

by Craig Huegel

Attracting wildlife with a feeder is fundamentally different from providing for their needs with a landscape that feeds them. Feeders mostly bring in animals that live elsewhere. Landscapes feed animals that actually reside on site. Understanding this difference is critical because the average household in this country spends more on bird food than on direct contributions to habitat protection. Our love of wildlife needs to be better focused on the real issues and there is no better place to begin than in our own yards.

Gardening for wildlife allows us to combine our interest in native plants with our desire to have a landscape alive with the activity of living creatures. It is an effort to restore some natural balance to the areas where we live and work, and it permits us to carry on at least some communion with the real world in those places. Wildlife gardens are not a random collection of plants surrounding an assortment of well-stocked feeders. They are habitats that produce the food and cover necessary for the songbirds and other animals that we desire.

Providing food is one component of a wildlife garden. What we hope to create are the conditions of a natural system that produce the types of food that are needed. Of course, different animals eat different things. This is where planning takes place. If we want to be effective, we must first learn what our target animals eat. We also must realistically limit our efforts to providing for the wildlife that could live in our area in the space that we have available.

Food can take many forms, but all types can be provided through creative planning. Insects, for example, are a mainstay of many diets. Even most fruit-eating birds rely on insects to fuel their young during the nesting season. Although insects can't be planted, you can design your landscape to produce them. Most nesting birds feed extensively on caterpillars and other "worms". The best way to provide them is to plant the larval foods of butterflies and moths. A well-designed butterfly garden can serve as a valuable area of a bird garden. During the spring and summer months, many caterpillars will fall prey to a variety of birds, while others escape to produce the new generation of butterflies.

Insects also can be encouraged through the proper use of mulch. If you have ever visited a woodland, you probably have seen birds and other wildlife picking through the leaf litter in search of insect food. Leaves and other mulches that easily decompose provide excellent conditions for many insects and ideal feeding areas for many insectivorous wildlife. They also aid in the growth of your plants.

To have insects, you must garden without pesticides. The advertising world has done its best to convince us that "bugs" are "bad" and that we need to poison them at every opportunity. This simply is not true. Insects are a valuable component of every ecosystem and in the vast majority of situations we should let nature balance any problems that we might have with them. Part of this natural balance will be achieved by insectivorous wildlife.

Much of our gardening efforts, however, will be directed at wildlife that eat seeds and fruits - those same animals that visit our feeders. Nearly every plant that we would likely use in our landscape produces some kind of fruit. As a wildlife gardener, our task is to evaluate the relative value of each in the whole landscape and then choose the plants that will help us achieve our goals.

Your landscape must be viewed as a community where the plants work together. It is a mistake to evaluate the potential merits of each plant choice as though it operated by itself. It does not.

There are a great many plants that could function well within your wildlife garden and selecting the best ones for your situation may seem difficult. It needn't be. A few overall characteristics should be considered in making your plant selections.

Consider the time of year that the fruit will be available. It goes without saying that not all plants produce fruits that ripen at the same time. Many fruits ripen in the fall. Generally, this is not a time of food scarcity and it is fairly easy to build these food sources into your garden. Fruits are much less abundant in the spring and winter months, and providing some at these times can have a major impact on your garden's usefulness.

The size and texture of the fruit will play a major role in determining which wildlife will use it. Large fruit will be eaten mostly by large wildlife. Fruit with a hard outer covering will be used only by those animals that can either chew through them or swallow them whole. Even plants in the same genus can vary greatly in these characteristics. Acorns are an excellent example. While some oaks, like the myrtle oak, produce acorns that average about 1/4-inch in length, others typically produce acorns greater than 3/8-inches long - excellent for
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in designing a garden for wildlife. Plants provide much more than food and other considerations will be discussed at another time. You also will want to consider your own tastes to make your landscape aesthetically pleasing to you. Begin by making a list of possibilities and then begin to choose and eliminate potential candidates. Starting from a plan will save you time eventually and will increase your enjoyment. And consult as many references as you can locate to be sure of a particular plant's characteristics.

Craig Huegel, author of Butterflying with Florida's Native Plants, has a new FNPS book in preparation on gardening for wildlife. He is an urban wildlife biologist for Pinellas County.

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