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# Palmetto



A New Orchid Species From Central Florida • The Wildflower Garden – Piriqueta • Gardening For The Birds

# Native Gardening For The Birds

By Craig Huegel, Pinellas Chapter



Illustration by Marjorie Shropshire

*Most new members of FNPS join their local chapter to gain more knowledge about using native plants in their home landscape. They see problems with the traditional approach that relies heavily on turf grasses and non-natives. They want to reduce the amount of water, fertilizer, chemicals and labor necessary to make everything look good. They want to simplify and to get more in touch with nature and natural processes. Eventually, most also want their landscapes to do something besides simply exist as a dressing for their home.*

That something often includes providing habitat for wildlife, and for most folks, wildlife means birds. According to data collected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Americans spend more than \$3.5 billion each year on wild-bird-related items (feed, feeders, etc.) and activities such as bird-watching trips. These direct expenditures lead to additional spending too – meals and lodging, for example, that pumps an estimated \$29 billion into the national economy. As a nation, we are fascinated by birds. This does not mean, however, that we are investing our dollars wisely; only that we are willing to do something. That is where FNPS has one of its strongest benefits. We can provide effective leadership by showing our members and the public at large a reason to use native plants with a purpose that many already ascribe to.

Creating a landscape for birds relies on the landscape to provide habitat. It relegates the feeders and bird houses to second-class status, to be used within the landscape and to fill small niches that are naturally not present. They are no longer the focus of a homeowner bird-lover's program, but a small to non-existent afterthought. It is now the landscape itself that will provide the necessary habitat functions required by the birds – no longer a window dressing for the home, but a living system with a directed function.

Creating a landscape for wildlife requires an understanding of habitat and that requires planning and forethought. By itself, habitat is a very simple concept – wildlife require food, water and cover to survive. When an area provides this, it meets the animal's habitat needs and the animal can survive there. The complex part about habitat is that each species has different habitat needs. Evolution, driven by competition, is constantly at work to refine the mixture of species present in any area. Those that are capable of existing sort themselves out to use the limited resources in different ways. To put it very simply, each finds its own things to eat and places to hide, nest and sleep in. In the natural world, each species has its own niche to exploit. Those that lose their niche become extinct.

Therefore, no single landscape plan can be handed out as a landscape for birds. Different birds have different needs. Blue jays generally love the typical home landscape that depends on a few hardwood shade trees and a relatively open understory. Scrub-jays normally disappear once their native landscape is developed. Both are gregarious species that are tolerant of people. It is simply different habitat requirements that dooms one and favors the other. That landscape is our choice to make.

The plants we use in developed landscapes and the way we put them together are the two greatest factors in determining which bird species will live near us and which will not. We have great power, but we rarely use it effectively. I believe that the real tragedy of modern Florida is not that we have attracted so many residents, but that we have been so ignorant about how to incorporate them.

Gardening for birds requires us first to decide which birds we are gardening for and then to become knowledgeable about what their

habitat needs are. We cannot be truly effective if we simply start planting without a purpose. In the end, we will get birds but they may not be the species we most desired. There is no single landscape design. We can be creative and we have a great many choices. That can be a bit intimidating to some, but it is really liberating once the simplicity of it all is understood.

## Food, Water and Cover

**FOOD** – With the more traditional approach, we expect birds in our landscape to eat bird seed and little else. The problem is that most birds do not eat seeds and the vast majority that do will not touch the stuff that is used in a lot of wild-bird mixes. The truth is, birds eat a wide diversity of things. In nature, the landscape provides these foods. Our home landscape can do the same with some planning.

The plants we use will provide the backbone of that food web. Some will provide seeds while others will produce soft fruits or nuts. Flowering plants will attract insects that will, in turn, provide insects for birds that require them. Insects and other invertebrates also will occur in the mulched areas we create. Mulches need to be a decaying organic layer, not a sterile one. Butterfly gardens can provide caterpillars to feed nestlings. Dead branches and scaly bark can provide homes to other insects that will someday be discovered by birds such as woodpeckers and nuthatches. We can even feed raptors by carefully planning features that will attract their prey to areas where they may be more vulnerable. The key is to understand the food needs of the birds we are most interested in.

For a landscape to provide habitat, it must feed birds year-round or, at least, during the time they are resident. If all of your food is exhausted while the birds are still present, your landscape becomes non-functional. You must have something for them to eat during their entire stay. For fruit-eating birds such as mockingbirds and cardinals, this means planting a diversity of species that have different fruiting times. For insect eaters, it means maintaining conditions that generate insects – and not spraying your yard as the commercials tell you to do.



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# Native Gardening For The Birds

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You also need to know how the diets of your birds may change over the year. Many species have different dietary requirements in different months. For those, most switch from a seed- or fruit-based diet to an insect one. Tree swallows, for example, feed almost completely on small flying insects during the spring, summer, and fall months, but switch to wax myrtle fruit while they are here in the winter. Bluebirds feed extensively on insects during the nesting season and switch to small soft fruits and seeds during the fall and winter.

In evaluating plants for their food value, a number of traits will be important to consider. I will discuss some of the most important ones very briefly here. If nothing else, this discussion will give you some indication of the types of things that should be thought of. For the purposes of this article, I am confining my scope to foods directly produced by plants such as fruits, seeds and nuts, not indirect foods such as insects.

**SEASON OF AVAILABILITY** – One of the most important considerations in selecting plants for a bird-oriented landscape is the time of year that each species will be producing food. Plants have a well-defined fruiting season. For some, their fruit ripens all at once and are then gone for another year. For others, fruit is produced and ripens over a protracted period. It is important to know what this season is for each of the plants that you are considering for your landscape. If you are feeding fruit or seed-eating birds, it does you no good to have all of your fruit ripen at the same time or to have seasons where no food is available. If you are targeting species that are migrants, make sure you have food during the correct seasons. Fall traditionally is a time of plenty. Make sure you have something during other months.

**FOOD SIZE** – Birds do not have teeth, so much of their food is swallowed whole. Large birds can swallow fairly large fruits, but small birds require much smaller fare. This also is true for hard fruits such as acorns. Different oaks produce different-sized acorns. Hawthorns produce haws of markedly different sizes. Just because a genus is touted for birds on someone's list, does not mean that each species is equally valuable. Consider the size of your bird and the size of the fruit before committing to using a particular plant in your landscape.

**VOLUME PRODUCED** – How much food does each individual plant produce? Knowing this can help you decide how many of each you will need to meet your landscape objectives. It does no good to pack your landscape with plants that produce copious amounts of food on each individual because much of that plenty may go to waste. A good example of this is beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*). A few beautyberry can go a long way.

**SEX** – Some plants are dioecious, meaning that each produces flowers that are either male or female. Because of this, you need male plants to pollinate the females and only female plants produce fruit. Hollies, wax myrtle and red cedar are a good examples of this. Other species are monoecious and either produce flowers of both sexes on each individual plant or produce flowers that have both male and female parts. Monoecious plants can pollinate themselves and each plant can produce fruit. It is very important to know this for each of the plants you are considering. If you are planting hollies, you will want mostly female plants. While male plants are important, you will want to minimize their number to maximize the food production in your landscape. If your selection is monoecious, you can have success planting only one individual.

**WATER** – For the most part, water for birds is best be provided by a birdbath, pond or other artificial means. Though birds will get a portion of their water intake requirement from the foods they eat (just like we do), a free-standing source of water will be required if you wish to include all aspects of habitat into your home landscape. Incorporate water features that are actually designed for birds – not the ones better suited as lawn art.

**COVER** – Cover is a function of individual plant choices and landscape design. All plants provide some cover value, but they can be markedly different in their ability to create different cover conditions. And since plants work together in a landscape, your landscape design is often more important than your individual plant choices.

Cover also is far more complex than the simple two-dimensional concept that it is often considered to be. There are, in fact, many cover requirements to factor in for any given bird species. Nesting cover may be very different from feeding and hiding cover. Carolina wrens, for example, require some sort of cavity or a nest box to successfully reproduce, but need a dense thicket to hide in and plenty of mulched understory for the small invertebrates on which it often feeds. A good landscape for wrens will have all three areas integrated together.

In evaluating plants for their cover value, several key traits are important to consider. I will discuss some of them briefly here, but realize that certain short-comings in the cover value of one plant can often be compensated for by incorporating it effectively within the overall landscape plan. Since your plants will be incorporated into a landscape, they simply need to work together. That said, not all plants provide cover equally.

**EVERGREEN VS DECIDUOUS** – Although Visitor Bureaus around the state try very hard to present an image of Florida

as a tropical destination, the vast majority is actually far more temperate than tropical, and many of our native species are deciduous during the winter months. It is very important to your landscape design to know which plants will lose their leaves during the winter and which will not. Deciduous plants can be very effective at providing cover, but your landscape will need some areas during the winter where birds can hide and this can only be accomplished with evergreens. Use evergreen plants in clusters within deciduous habitat zones or create thickets all by themselves in certain pockets within your yard. Either way, you will want zones of winter hiding cover – not just isolated individual plants.



The Florida Scrub-jay – *Apelocoma coerulescens*.  
Photo by M. Shropshire

**SIZE AND GROWTH HABIT** – There really are two distinct components that I have lumped under this heading. The first relates to the size at maturity. Few of us can afford to plant mature specimens into our landscape, so you will have to consider how your landscape will change over time and how the growth form of each species will change as it matures. An excellent example of this is red cedar (*Juniperus silicicola*). Red cedar eventually forms a tall tree with a straight open trunk, few to no lower branches and a rounded crown. As a young tree, however (the size most of us will plant), red cedar is a very dense “shrub” with branches nearly to ground level. It is important to consider the amount of cover in your landscape at each level – canopy, mid-canopy and ground – and to understand how all of this will change as the plants you have chosen mature over time.

**FOLIAGE DENSITY** – Not all plants are created equal in terms of their ability to shield birds from the view of “outsiders.” Foliage density is an important consideration when choosing plants to provide various cover functions. Myrtle oak (*Quercus myrtifolia*) is much denser than Chapman oak (*Q. chapmanii*), for example. Although not every plant in your landscape needs to act like a visual screen, it is important that some areas function as thickets of hiding and/or escape cover. Landscape design can often make up for the shortcomings of foliage density, but there is something to be said for using a few of the species that are “thick.”

**BRANCH STRUCTURE AND STRENGTH** – Most birds build their own nests and they choose the site (when it is not on the ground) to physically hold their nest based on certain characteristics that include the branch structure and limb strength of the host tree or shrub. Small birds evaluate this a bit differently than larger ones, but regardless, some plants are just inferior as nest sites than others. Elms (*Ulmus* species), for example, are often excellent nest sites as they have numerous branches of different sizes. A sycamore is less valuable

in this regard. A myrsine (*Rapanea punctata*) will never do what a Walter’s viburnum (*Viburnum obovatum*) does.

**THORNINESS** – Thorniness can be a huge asset to a landscape designed for birds. Although thorny plants are often avoided by homeowners, their “nastiness” can be reduced significantly if used in corners of the landscape that aren’t going to be actively used by humans or in islands of habitat where they are buffered by non-thorny species. Small birds fleeing a potential predator can find effective escape in the foliage of a thorny plant, while many nesting birds seek the additional protection that such foliage offers. For this reason, consider the judicious use of species with thorns or spines.

In a future issue, I will discuss some of the landscape design considerations that I find important to this topic. Suffice to say, gardening for birds requires some thought in order to be effective, and the time to think is at the beginning of your landscape planning – not well after the framework has been planted and as an afterthought. I hope that this discussion has given you some basics to use as you proceed to refine your landscape and make it all that it is capable of becoming. 🌿

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**About the Author:** Dr. Craig Huegel earned a B.A. in Zoology and a M.S. in Wildlife Ecology at the University of Wisconsin and a PhD in Animal Ecology at Iowa State University. He is a founding member of the Pinellas County chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society, and is the author of *Florida Plants for Wildlife: A Selection Guide to Native Trees and Shrubs* and *Butterfly Gardening with Florida’s Native Plants*.



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**The purpose of the Florida Native Plant Society**

is to conserve, preserve, and restore the native plants and native plant communities of Florida.

**Official definition of native plant:**

For most purposes, the phrase Florida native plant refers to those species occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact, according to the best available scientific and historical documentation. More specifically, it includes those species understood as indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape.



**The Palmetto**

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