

The Quarterly Journal of the Florida Native Plant Society

# Palmetto



# Gardening for the Birds: Part II

## Landscape Design



by Craig Huegel

In my previous article\*, I discussed some of the most important considerations in selecting plants for a wildlife landscape. Remember, our goal is to provide habitat for birds (and other animals as well) and the habitat approach requires us to provide year-round food, water and cover that meets the needs of each species that we are designing for. It is not enough to simply follow some generic landscape plan provided to you by one of the many wildlife experts or organizations. Although many of these have some merit as a starting point, none of them will allow you to reach the full potential possible. To do that, you need to learn the habitat requirements of each species you wish to target, evaluate the current condition of your landscape, and devise a landscape plan that will then augment or fill in the gaps that currently exist.

\*See *Palmetto*, Volume 25, Number 1 – Winter 2008

*Plants relate to each other in a landscape. It is one situation where the sum is greater than the parts; one plus one does not equal two, but something greater.*

Above left: Rouge plant can be an effective cover and food plant for birds when planted in mass beneath taller woody species. *Photo by Craig Huegel.*

Right: Red-bellied woodpecker feeding on the fruit of a marlberry. Many songbirds feed on fruit for a part of their diet.  
Photo by Christina Evans.

Plant selection is extremely important to reaching your goal. The way you place these plants within your landscape is equally important. Landscape design is the one element of this equation that often gets short shrift, but understanding it is vital to success. It is not enough to simply put a plant into the ground. It needs to be placed into the overall community. Plants relate to each other in a landscape. It is one situation where the sum is greater than the parts; one plus one does not equal two, but something greater.

As an example, even the best bird bath becomes useless (or dangerous) to birds when placed in the wrong context. A bird bath placed in the open yard becomes a hawk feeder that calls attention to any songbird considering the option of suicide. No bird will last very long, even in a suburban setting, if crazy enough to bathe or drink in the wide open spaces where everything else will notice it. Similarly, a bird bath placed in dense vegetation also will likely not get used, as it too is dangerous. Thick foliage can hide potential predators, such as cats. Birds learn this or they die. Therefore, the best location is one that provides good cover near the bath so that birds can sneak up close and evaluate the risk. From this vantage point they can get comfortable, dart out to get their bath or drink, and then escape back to the safety of the nearby cover. Bird baths are simple structures, but their value is dictated by their location in the landscape.

I use this example to make clear the point that context is just as important as the item (be it bird bath or individual plant) itself. Landscape design influences the role of each individual plant that you decide to incorporate. While one rouge plant (*Rivina humilis*) will provide some food value with its small red berries, it will provide no measurable cover. When planted in mass, however, in the understory of taller shrubs or trees, it creates an excellent place for ground-feeding songbirds to forage in relative secrecy. And, it provides food for birds that feed on small fruit. Often, plants that are wonderful food plants, but lacking in cover value,

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# Landscape Design

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can be very effectively used if planted in mass or in the community of other plants that can make up for their individual deficiencies. Species such as marlberry (*Ardisia escallonioides*), myrsine (*Rapanea punctata*), and coffees (*Psychotria* spp.) are good examples of wonderful wildlife plants that need to be carefully placed within the landscape to get their full value.

In the many years that I have been speaking to groups about wildlife gardening, the one statement that gets repeated most regularly is that “I wish I could landscape my yard for wildlife, but I live in a deed-restricted community and my neighbors would object” – or something very similar. The idea that a wildlife landscape be “wild” is not valid when translated as “dense” and “like a jungle.” Neither is the idea that you should let your yard be “natural” – translated as let it develop in whatever direction it wants to take. The former idea seems to come from our societal notion that the “jungle” is where wildlife thrive and that anything else is less. The latter idea seems often to stem from those that desperately wish to believe that any landscape of small scale (such as those around our homes) can exist in peak condition without constant weeding and fussing. We need to accept that wildlife landscapes can come in a wide variety of “looks” and that all of them will require regular maintenance. Nature’s landscapes use a variety of natural forces for maintenance. Our’s will require forces that we provide – pruning, weeding and sometimes watering.

Florida has the third richest diversity of wildlife in the nation because it has the third greatest diversity of native plants. Our diversity of native plants is the direct result of the diversity of growing conditions, microclimates, and geology within our state. We have a wealth of plant communities and each of them has its own plant-species components and wildlife that are adapted. We can use this diversity to our advantage by copying the general style of each plant community to meet our personal aesthetic of design and meet the needs of the wildlife adapted to it.

At nearly polar extremes, take the general design of a longleaf pine sandhill community and contrast it with that of an oak hammock. The sandhill has few widely spaced canopy trees that let light into the understory and a diverse understory of grasses and wildflowers. The hammock is comprised of a diversity of canopy trees and an understory that is often poor in grasses and wildflowers (at least until you get to north Florida where most of the trees are deciduous for several months) and often rich in vines. The former is not all that different in structure from what is often seen in suburban Florida while the latter is not that far from what we think of as the “jungle” we envision as necessary for a wildlife-friendly landscape.

The truth is, both styles have their own wildlife that depend on that structure and neither approach is better than the other. Which approach we choose will depend on our goals and the aesthetic we are most comfortable with.

When a more formal look is required or desired, it can be done with great wildlife results if our choice of plants is made with wildlife in mind. Select the “widely spaced” trees from a list of native species that will provide the food and cover values that you need and replace the turf grasses with a diversity of native grasses and forbs. Such an approach will take work, but it can have enormous aesthetic appeal once your grasses and wildflowers are thriving and the weeds are a minor component. The key is adding a diverse understory of plants with common growing requirements. And, when it is done correctly, there is no homeowner association covenant that I am aware of that you would violate. You can meet your need for “grass” and your requirement to maintain it within a height restriction if you select wisely.

You can make a more “normal” suburban landscape better for wildlife also – by selecting species that are better at providing food and cover than those typically used and by increasing diversity. Replace the formal hedge of nearly useless non-natives with a mixed hedge of natives such as Walter’s viburnum (*Viburnum obovatum*), Florida privet (*Forestiera segregata*), and Simpson’s stopper (*Myrcianthes fragrans*), for example. All of these species can be pruned, if desired, have great value as a hedge and provide food and cover for birds and other wildlife. By mixing them, you get the different values of each species in the same landscape model.

You can beat some of the various landscape ordinances that I have witnessed over the years by simply defining areas for wildlife within a more formal boundary. In my first Florida neighborhood, I did this by keeping some of my turfgrass and using landscape timbers to separate it from other areas of my yard that were far less formal. My trees and shrubs were all selected for their wildlife value and my natural understory areas were well defined – making them look more like a “garden” than an unkempt area that I was too lazy to mow. It worked, as the lawn police visited me only once and then left me in peace.

Landscape planning requires some creativity in meeting both your aesthetic needs and the needs of the wildlife you most desire. It requires knowledge of those species you are designing for and it requires knowledge of the growing requirements of the plants you will ultimately select so that they will grow together as a community within your landscape. Your landscape will require maintenance over the years, but this should be relatively minimal if you have chosen plants adapted to your growing conditions and to each other. Realize that if you use species that are aggressive, either by suckering or seeding, they may out-compete those that are less so. Using dotted horsemint (*Monarda punctata*), for example,

in a wildflower “meadow” will someday mean that your meadow will be nearly all this species or you will forever be weeding seedlings out of it to make room for things such as butterfly milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) that will not spread and require some open space around them. Many vines, such as Carolina yellow jessamine (*Gelsemium sempervirens*), will sucker profusely once they are well established. This can be fine in parts of your landscape that are less formal, but it can be impossible to deal with in other areas where the suckers cannot be effectively controlled. Your plants will have to work together, regardless of which approach you use.

Finally, you can use different landscaping approaches in different parts of your yard. There is nothing that prevents you from making a hammock in one area and a pineland in another. In fact, by doing so, you can provide for different wildlife species and create a greater diversity of niches that can then be exploited. My wife and I have taken this approach in our yard. We used the many live oaks left on our lot in the backyard as the backbone of a mesic hammock – and we added a number of other canopy and understory trees and shrubs to increase structure and species diversity. In the front yard where no trees were left and a cluster of saw palmetto remained, we planted

longleaf pine, slowly eliminated the grass and have been adding wildflowers and native grasses adapted to xeric, well-drained soils. We built a pond and a marsh along the side yard in an area where there once was an above-ground pool and all that remained was a depression of well-drained sands. On the other side of the yard, we will someday finish our vegetable garden. That part will be mostly for us, but it will include a great many larval food plants for butterflies.

Although this approach may not be your aesthetic, we have had a lot of fun working on it and we have begun to see the results in wildlife use that we were striving for. Your approach should be different because it is your landscape. Make it a part of nature and you too will see birds and other wildlife become a part of it. In the final analysis, your landscape will be rewarding in far more ways and you will look forward to spending time in it – even if some of that time is spent weeding and pruning. Best of luck in your wildlife gardening endeavors.

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#### **About the Author**

Dr. Craig Huegel is a naturalist and ecologist. He helped establish the Urban Wildlife Cooperative Extension Program at the University of Florida, and was administrator of Pinellas County's Environmental Lands Division. His newest book, *Native Plant Landscaping for Florida Wildlife* was recently published (review on page 11).



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#### **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.

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