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Attracting Wildlife with Florida Native Plants



What Wildlife Needs

Wildlife needs food, water, and cover, and can only live where these needs are met. Florida's plants and animals (from panthers and black bears to the tiniest insects) have co-evolved over thousands of years, resulting in a complex and wondrous web of interdependence. An ideal landscape uses native plants to provide a year round food supply – such as berries, fruit, seeds, and nuts. Water is essential for wildlife, and your water source can be as elaborate as a pond with a waterfall or as simple as a dish of water. Cover needs to be provided for wildlife to breed, nest, hide, sleep, and feed.

Many native plants that provide food also provide cover. Dense evergreen trees or shrubs (such as yaupon holly or Walter's viburnum) or thorny shrubs and vines (such as blackberries) are perfect cover, as well as a food supply, for a variety of wildlife. Dead trees and brush piles also provide cover. Many animals require a cavity in a dead tree (snag) for nesting. If possible, leave a dead tree or two for the bluebirds, woodpeckers and flying squirrels.

Only humans make "waste." Mother nature recycles everything. All of the yard "trash" that people throw away can be used by some animal somewhere in the food chain. Create brush piles with fallen tree limbs and use fallen leaves and grass clippings as your mulch. Leave stumps and fallen logs for cover and foraging areas.

Pull out all the stops...

So you planted a nice big native shrub with flowers right in the middle of your yard, and still haven't seen any wildlife?

- **Diversify.** Plant a variety of native species. Different plants flower, fruit, and drop their leaves in different seasons. Plan on a full menu and color palette of plants for every season. Even a small landscape can include dozens of species of plants.
- **Cater to every taste.** Most native plants listed as "wildlife attracting" have fruits or nectar eaten by birds and butterflies. However, insect-eating birds need plants that attract insects. Tiny flowers that don't attract us often attract insects (and the birds that eat them). Consult your FNPS chapter for insect-attracting suggestions in your area.

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- **Feed the baby.** To have adult butterflies, the species-specific larval food plants need to be available. Larval food plants can be denuded by hungry caterpillars! Relax and enjoy the fact that you're feeding baby butterflies. Your plants will grow back. Remember, they're naturally adapted to this abuse.
- **Go organic.** Opt for slow release, natural/organic source fertilizers applied only when absolutely necessary (in many yards, that's never). Feed your plants with leaf litter and kitchen compost. Use herbicides and fertilizers with great care and remember, "the label is the law." Never use pesticides.
- **Spare that weed.** Ralph Waldo Emerson said that a weed is a plant whose virtues have yet to be discovered. Leaving some native "weeds" in your garden, such as Spanish needles (*Bidens* spp.), helps ensure that there is always something in bloom for butterflies to nectar on. Many "weedy" plants are also butterfly larval foods.
- **Make it red.** Depending on where you live in Florida, you might choose coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*), cross vine (*Bignonea capreolata*), firebush (*Hamelia patens*), red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*), scarlet hibiscus (*Hibiscus coccineus*) or tropical sage (*Salvia coccinea*). Everybody loves red flowers – hummingbirds, butterflies and people!
- **Dress the yard in layers.** Include big trees, small trees, big shrubs, small shrubs, wildflowers, vines, and bunchgrasses in your landscape design. By providing vegetation at every "level," you'll support animals that forage and nest on the ground, a few feet up, or high up in the air.

Additional Resources

Gardening for Florida's Butterflies, Pamela F. Traas, Great Outdoors Publishing, 1999.

Florida Butterfly Gardening: A Complete Guide to Attracting, Identifying, and Enjoying Butterflies of the Lower South, Marc C. Minno and Maria Minno, University Press of Florida, 1999.

Landscaping for Florida's Wildlife: Re-creating Native Ecosystems in Your Yard, Joe Schaefer and George Tanner, University Press of Florida and IFAS Extension Service, 1998.

Planning and Planting a Native Plant Yard, John G. Beriault, Florida Native Plant Society, 1995. Available from some FNPS Chapters.

Planting a Refuge for Wildlife: How to create a backyard habitat for Florida's birds and beasts, Susan Cerulean, Celeste Botha, and Donna Legare, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission Nongame Wildlife Program and USDA Soil Conservation Service, 1991. (Available free from some FNPS Chapters or by mail for a donation to the Florida Wildlife Federation.)

Certification Programs

Check out the resources provided in these public education programs:

Florida Wildlife Extension's Florida Backyard Landscapes for Wildlife Program

National Wildlife Federation Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program™

University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

(IFAS) Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program

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