Landscaping For Wildlife

presented by Craig Huegel at our October 1998 meeting
compiled by Sid Taylor

What animals and birds do you want in your yard or property? Each needs a specific habitat. All landscapes provide wildlife habitat (i.e. concrete provides for reptiles). Florida has the third richest diversity of wildlife in the nation. At one time 40% of Florida was longleaf pine and wiregrass systems.

There are two approaches to landscaping for wildlife - the human approach and the landscape approach. The human approach is to think food, water, and cover. The landscape approach is to consider the plants, their features, and what they provide.

The Human Approach
Most of what we do in our landscape we do for ourselves, not the wildlife. People love animals and want animals to appreciate them. We need to plant landscapes with the needs of the animals in mind.

Is Feeding Wildlife Effective?
Yes, if we provide the right food. Bird feeding is a multimillion dollar a year industry in this country. Commercial birdseed contains 75 to 95% millet. Only three birds eat millet, rock doves, house sparrows and mourning doves. Have you ever seen a skinny mourning dove? They stay fat because they feed on weed seeds. They cannot reach the millet that we place in our bird feeders for them because they feed on the ground. If you use bird feeders remember to match the seed type to the bird. Cardinals and most songbirds eat sunflower seeds. Gold finches eat thistle seeds

Most birds eat seeds only part of the year. We really need to put out minnows, caterpillars, worms, insects and berries if we want to feed the birds. Why should just seed eating birds get our help?

A hummingbird's diet should only be supplemented with sugar water. Planting nectar plants such as firebush (*Hamelia patens*) is most important to the hummingbirds. Don't use honey, and be sure to clean the feeder every three days to prevent spoilage.

How Should You Provide Water?
Birdbaths are the first choice, however, they should be placed on the ground for easy access to the birds rather than as a lawn ornament. It should be shallow and have gradual sloping sides. Birds and animals need moderate cover around their water source to feel safe enough to drink. At the same time, they need to be able to observe predators too.

What About Cover?
Cavity nesters need dead trees so leave dead trees standing, or provide nest boxes throughout your property.

Bat houses should have a temperature range of 80 to 120 degrees. Place the house on the coolest side of the post. Put it up as high as possible. If it is to be placed on a tree make sure it's clear of any

branches to provide for easy 'launching' from underneath. The best place to install a bat house is on a utility pole.

Martin houses should be constructed of wood. Metal gets very hot in the Florida sun and can kill baby birds.

The Landscape Approach
Think of your yard or property as a part of the world you live in. We can mitigate for the ravaged yards and properties in our areas by landscaping in our own yards and properties for wildlife.

Create small artificial ponds (with liners or pre-fabs) and you'll see a huge increase in the frogs, toads, dragonflies and assorted insects that live in your yard.

Landscaping for wildlife makes you a producer of habitat for wildlife. You are providing a food and shelter source so that animals can live, reproduce and make their living in your yard.

Plant Features To Consider
Evaluate plants for their wildlife value. What do they provide for the animals? If a particular plant isn't working within the scheme and design that you desire be bold and rip it up! Make room for something that will work. Give the other to a friend, donate it to the local plant society, or put it in the chipper.

Consider that the vegetative parts of the plants will provide for grazing animals such as deer and butterfly larva.

Providing plants also provides another food source for the birds and animals - insects! Most 'bugs' are a vital component of the landscape and are NOT troubling pests. They are crucial as pollinators and as food for wildlife.

Plants As A Food Source
Is the fruit or seed of the plant the appropriate size for the animal or bird you want to accommodate? Hickories are best for gray squirrels and fox squirrels. Oaks provide acorns in different sizes, however, most acorns are only eaten by jays or turkeys. Little birds don't eat large fruit. Summer haw (*Crataegus flava*) has large fruit (up to 1 inch), on the other hand parsley haw (*Crataegus marshallii*) has small fruit (1/4 inch). Wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*) also has small fruit for small birds.

Daisies (Composites) are good bird food. Birds really enjoy weed and wildflower seeds.

What Time of Year Does The Fruit Ripen?
Florida Privet (*Forestiera segregata*) ripens in late spring when there is almost nothing else available for the birds to eat. Winged Elm (*Ulma alata*) ripens in spring, unlike the non-native drake elm. Have fruit that ripens throughout the year.

Not every plant produces the same amount of food every year. Planting one or two beautyberries (Callicarpa americana) in a small yard is sufficient because they produce a great number of berries. However, the Florida privet doesn't produce nearly as many berries so a grouping of three or more may be needed in order to provide adequate berries for the birds. Oaks have a heavy crop of acorns, but only about every fourth year.

Another consideration is the age at which your plants will produce fruit. Walter's viburnum (*Viburnum obovatum*) produces fruit its first or second year after planting. Conversely, an oak will take 8 to 10 years to produce acorns.

Palatability
Yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*) is yummy to the birds and gallberry (*Ilex glabra*) isn't (note the name gallberry). Birds usually devour the sweet fruits first, and save the bitter or plain tasting fruit for when there is little else to eat. Beautyberry, sparkleberry, and gallberry don't have much flavor, but are very important late winter foods.

Sex of plants
Ilex are dioecious; separate plants are separate sexes (dioecious means that the reproductive parts are in two houses). You need to plant at least five individual plants to raise your odds of getting at least two females for fruit production. Ask the nurseryman how the plants are propagated. Wax myrtles, red cedars, and fringe trees are all dioecious. If the plant was propagated from a cutting then all of the offspring will be the same sex. Sour gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*), black gum (*Nyssa biflora*) are dioecious but water tupelo (*Nyssa aquatica*) is monoecious.

Pollinators and Insects
Not all flowers are designed to be pollinated by the same thing. Dotted horsemint (*Monarda punctata*) is pollinated by everything except butterflies. Consider the shape, size and color of the flower when you make your selections.

Laurel oak is superb insect habitat and therefore as exceptional food tree for songbirds. Likewise the rough bark on pine trees harbors tons of insects and thus feeds the birds too.

Mulch will produce a large number of insects for the birds. Cypress mulch does not break down or decompose very quickly and doesn't provide a suitable habitat for insects. If possible use mulches from exotic pest plants like *Melaleuca*.

Cover and Shelter
Plant both evergreen and deciduous trees for cover year round. Birds use cover sites for many different purposes such as, nesting, wintering, loafing, feeding and hiding. Think of nest builders in regards to branch shape. Winged elm branches are crotched and have lots of home sites.

Also, consider branch strength for supporting nests. Yaupon holly has good strong branches for support. Also consider density. Yaupon holly and Walter's viburnum have dense foliage which makes for good nesting cover. Fringe trees aren't very dense and make lousy nest cover, but do provide food.

Plants with thorns provide excellent cover too. Sweet acacia, scrub haw, and tough bumelia are thorny plants and provide a safe haven for nesting birds.

Gnarliness is also a good characteristic of nesting cover like the wild plum.

Think of yourself as a wildlife architect. Use clustered plant groupings. Think about the big picture.

Dead trees are good. Mulch and leaf litter are good. Brush piles are good. All of these things provide habitat to enhance wildlife diversity in your yard or on your property. Landscape for the wildlife!

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