

Attracting wildlife to your landscape

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We are fortunate to have a lot of wildlife in our area. Just like any creature, they need space, cover, water, and food. Homeowners can provide these resources in their backyard. By following these recommendations from Mark E. Hostetler, University of Florida Assistant Professor, you can create a habitat that will make wildlife happy.

1. Limit the Amount of Lawn

A manicured lawn offers little food and cover for animals. By reducing the amount of mowed lawn in low traffic areas, you are creating shelter and food for many wildlife species. Eventually, various plants grow in unmowed areas, which provide a more diverse environment. Wildlife love diversity because it gives them more food sources. If tall grass isn't an attractive feature to you, replace the grass with ground cover plants. They do not need as much maintenance, are attractive, and provide shelter and food for wildlife. Master Gardeners at the Indian River County Extension Service can help you choose ground cover species that will work for you.

2. Increase Vertical Layering

Vertical layering is simply planting a variety of vegetation in different sizes and heights between the ground and tree canopy. It provides more cover and feeding opportunities for wildlife. To get the maximum benefit from vertical layering, you can plant vegetation of different heights in clumps or island.

3. Provide Snags and Brush Piles

Snags are trees that have become diseased or die and are left in place. Many wildlife species use snags for feeding and nesting. For example, some woodpeckers will only live in cavities that they have excavated in snags. In addition, many insects that are attracted to snags are food sources for many wildlife species. If you are concerned about having a dead tree in your landscape, have the tree cut to a height of fifteen feet by a tree surgeon. This height will still provide wildlife benefits.

Another option is to have brush piles in your landscape. It will provide food and shelter for wildlife. In order to maximize the benefits, place the brush piles near vegetation.

4. Provide Water

Water is another essential component for wildlife survival. You can simply place a bird bath in your yard or be a bit more complicated and create a pond. Ponds attract a variety of wildlife species and add an aesthetic value to your landscape.

5. Plant Native Vegetation

Native vegetation provides a better food source for wildlife, so having as many native plant species in your landscape will attract wildlife. Another benefit is that native plants require less maintenance and resources to sustain. Just make sure that you plant vegetation according to their specific conditions for optimal growth.

6. Provide Bird/Bat Houses and Bird Feeders

By giving birds and bats a home, you are giving them nesting and roosting shelter. In addition, other species such as flying squirrels and grey squirrels may use the houses when they are empty.

Bird feeders that are stocked with a variety of seeds will attract many different bird species. Place the feeders near bushes and trees so songbirds can escape a predator if necessary. If squirrels stealing bird food is a concern, place the feeders fifteen feet away from any vegetation. This distance will prevent squirrels from jumping onto the feeder, while still being close enough to vegetation where birds can escape a predator.

7. Remove Invasive Exotic Plants

Exotic species are non-native and some can be highly invasive where they will take over an area. These plants change the ecology of an area and may replace all native vegetation. A good example is the Brazilian Pepper. Instead of having a rich variety of plant species, an area only has one species. This loss of native vegetation can be detrimental to wildlife because it takes away their food source.

We can help reduce the potential of invasive exotic species taking over by removing them from our yard. Non-native invasive plants have seeds that can be easily carried away by wind, water, and wildlife. Once they become established, the plants will take over and degrade wildlife habitat to a level where it becomes unusable. Even though you may maintain an exotic invasive species in your landscape where it is controlled, other neighboring areas can be harmed.

8. Manage Pets

Cats and dogs can make wildlife nervous. Cats are very good hunters, and dogs will harass wildlife and may even kill an animal. There is the belief that if a pet is well-fed, it will not hunt, but this isn't the case. Cats and dogs will hunt for fun, so you need to take precautions if you want to keep attracting wildlife to your yard. Measures can include keeping your cat indoors, which is supported by animal welfare, veterinary, conservation, and scientific communities to keep them safe from traffic, strays, and many diseases that can be transmitted from contact with wild animals.

Exotic pets, such as parrots, giant toads, snakes, turtles, and lizards, also must be managed. You should never release any exotic animal into the wild. Exotic animals can become established and compete with native wildlife for resources. In addition, they can spread diseases to our native wildlife.

9. Reduce Pesticide Use

Many pesticides are broad spectrum, which means they kill whatever they come in contact with. For example, a broad spectrum insecticide will kill beneficial insects along with harmful insects. This negatively impacts wildlife that relies on those beneficial insects from their food. In addition, predators that eat wildlife that eat insects are impacted by a reduction in their food. In order to have a diverse wildlife population, there must be a diverse insect population.

You should get to know your bugs because approximately 99 percent of insects are helpful. So, before you spray, identify the insect. There are some unattractive bugs in nature that are extremely beneficial. The Master Gardeners at the Extension Service can help you with this task.

If you must use a pesticide in your landscape, do not apply it over a large area. Spot treat where you see the pest you want to get rid of. You can also let nature help you control pests by encouraging beneficial insects such as lady beetles and spiders. They eat a lot of insects.

10. Expand the Scale of Habitat

Wildlife species typically need more room than our yards provide. You can talk to your neighbors about creating larger wildlife patches by making attracting wildlife a group effort. By having wildlife friendly habitats in multiple yards, you and your neighbors will draw more species into your neighborhood.

If you have any questions about attracting wildlife to your back yard, please call the University of Florida/IFAS Indian River County Extension Service at (772) 770-5030.

Information for this article was from M.E. Hostetler, G. Klowden, S.W. Miller, and K.N. Youngentob (2003). "Landscaping backyards for wildlife: Top ten tips for success." University of Florida/IFAS Circular 1429.