

Creating a Bird Garden

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Essential elements for creating a bird garden.

All wildlife requires food, water, and cover and can only live where these requirements are met. An ideal landscape uses native plants to provide a year round food supply as well as cover for breeding, nesting, hiding, sleeping and feeding.

Food for birds.

Depending on the species they may require berries, fruit, seeds, nuts, insects or meat (owls, hawks).



Choose the right plants to provide their food.

Plant NATIVE species in your yard whenever possible. These plants are linked with the animal. They have evolved together over millions of years and work together to create the perfect habitat.

Always match plants to the site conditions (full sun, part sun/part shade, full shade, wet soil, dry soil, acidic soil, alkaline soil, salt tolerant, etc.). Look at the conditions in your yard first: sunny and shady areas, wet and dry areas, compare morning versus afternoon sun, test the pH of your soil, etc. *Then* go buy plants whose growing needs match the conditions in your yard.

Native plant species are usually much more tolerant of weather conditions at a given location. Once established, most species require little or no additional irrigation beyond normal rainfall. They typically grow more slowly, generating much less yard waste.

If you want to know the specific benefits that each type of plant provides for wildlife, consult the booklet entitled *Planting a Refuge for Wildlife*. This booklet includes a list of trees, shrubs, and vines, and gives their specific value to wildlife (see last section of booklet). One copy of this booklet is available for free and can be obtained by sending a request for one copy to: Planting a Refuge, P.O. Box 1289, Woodville, FL 32362-1289. Additional copies are 50 cents each. Make your check payable to the Florida Wildlife Federation, and write "Habitat Fund" in the Memo area on the check.

A University of Florida book entitled "Landscaping for Florida's Wildlife" will help you in recreating native ecosystems in your yard. It provides information about the different types of ecosystems and provides plant lists for those specific habitats. This can be obtained from the University of Florida IFAS bookstore at <http://IFASbooks.com>



Insects.

Only ½ of 1% of insects are pests. Almost all insects are either beneficial or non-harmful. Beneficial insects, good cultural practices, and using soap, oil or *Bacillus thuringiensis* products will control most pest insect problems.

Anything you can do to reduce pesticides in your yard will benefit wildlife. Most pesticides do not target *one* species of insect but will kill any type of insect that comes in contact with it. Thus, when you spray your yard with pesticides to kill one pest species, you are *also* killing many beneficial species. Don't use herbicides on flowering plants. Wait until the flowers are gone.

Almost all wildlife species eat insects in some way. Wildlife, and even humans, are truly connected to insects. Most birds, reptiles, amphibians and mammals eat insects. Even if they do not eat insects directly, their prey eat insects. For example, some hawks eat smaller birds. Some of these smaller birds eat insects. Good insect diversity promotes good wildlife diversity.

Insects provide a valuable service in the environment. They pollinate plants. Insect pollinators include flies, bees, wasps, beetles, moths, butterflies, and other insects. Without pollinating insects, some plant species can die out. This change in plant diversity ultimately will affect wildlife diversity. These plants might have provided food and shelter for various animals. Without the plants, many wildlife species may not be able to survive in the immediate area.

Instead of broadcasting pesticides over a large area, spot treat or use baits that target one pest species. If you spray broadly, you also kill the helpful insects. Promote helpful insects by not spraying pesticides. For example, encourage ladybugs, lacewings, minute pirate bugs and many others to live in your garden. They eat aphids and other soft bodied insects. Allow spiders and paper wasps to exist around your house. They are important. Did you know that some birds eat spiders, and hummingbirds use spider webs to build their nests?



Bird feeders.

Adding birdfeeders of different designs or with different seeds may increase the diversity of birds you see on your property.

If you add a hummingbird feeder, be sure to change water *often*, at least weekly during hot weather. Check it regularly to see if the solution becomes *cloudy*. If so, change it soon or it will make hummingbirds ill. *Wash hummingbird feeders* with just hot water and a little soap; don't use chlorine bleach when cleaning hummingbird feeders.

Wash all other plastic birdfeeders regularly with soap and water or a solution of 1 part chlorine bleach to 10 parts water. We recommend cleaning with chlorine at least bi-monthly, or when the feeders are exceptionally dirty. Rinse well with warm water after cleaning. Wash wood or cement birdfeeders with soap and warm water only (no chlorine). Remember to clean old or wet seeds out of the feeders or they will rot and make birds sick. Several lethal diseases can be transmitted between birds at feeders and birdbaths.

Locating the feeders near cover (bushes, trees) is helpful for songbirds if they have to escape a predator (outdoor cats). However, keep feeders at least 15 feet away from vegetation so that squirrels cannot jump onto the feeder. Fifteen feet is still close enough to provide birds with some avenue of escape from cats. Please keep cats indoors!!!



Water for birds.

Water is an essential part of productive wildlife habitats. Wildlife will benefit from any source of water you provide, such as a birdbath and/or a small pond. Ponds are not only beautiful, but also attract a variety of species and enhance amphibian breeding. Birds are attracted to the sounds of running or dripping water so try having a fountain or dripper.

Birdbaths should be placed so that cats can't sneak up on unsuspecting users. Keeping brush cover nearby offers protection and perches where birds can preen. Just be sure not to have low shrubbery too close—cats (a non-native species) will use it for ambushes. In general, the lower the birdbath, the more open space there should be around it. Please keep cats indoors for their own safety and for bird's safety.

Birds prefer baths with textured bottoms for firm footing. You can cover smooth bottoms with pebbles or sand. Water in a birdbath should be no deeper than two to three inches in the middle, and the sides of the bath should slope gently so birds can easily climb in and out.

Birdbaths are available in materials as varied as concrete, terracotta, and plastic. Concrete models are expensive and cumbersome, but provide excellent footing for birds and will not budge in severe weather. A plastic birdbath will need to be secured against strong winds. It is best to avoid plastic for the environment.

Keep the water in birdbaths clean and consistently available. **Wash** birdbaths regularly with soap and water or a solution of 1 part chlorine bleach to 10 parts water. We recommend cleaning with chlorine at least bi-monthly, or when the birdbaths are exceptionally dirty. Rinse well with warm water after cleaning. Wash cement birdbaths with soap and warm water only (no chlorine).



Shelter.

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 (such as blackberries) are perfect cover, as well as a food supply. Dead trees and brush piles also provide cover.

What types of birds nest in birdhouses? How do you make your birdhouse attractive to birds, especially if you want to attract a particular species?

Cavity-Nesting Birds: The types of birds that nest in birdhouses (nest boxes) are called "cavity-nesting" species. They typically make holes in dead trees or use existing cavities (natural or bird-made). Cavity-nesting birds include woodpeckers, owls, chickadees, great-crested flycatchers, bluebirds, nuthatches, kestrels, wood ducks, etc. Even small mammals such as flying squirrels will roost in nest boxes! In urban areas, cavity-nesting birds may not be able to find enough natural cavities for nesting. That makes birdhouses a valuable habitat resource for these birds.

Some cavity-nesting birds are *primary* cavity-nesters and some are *secondary* cavity-nesters. Primary cavity-nesters (woodpeckers) excavate their own cavities, usually in dead or dying trees. Secondary cavity-nesters (bluebirds, chickadees, owls, great-crested flycatchers, etc.) don't make their own cavity. They use a cavity that has been excavated by a primary cavity-nesting bird, *or* they use a natural cavity if they can find one. Secondary cavity-nesting birds are the species most likely to use your birdhouse(s).

Leave non-hazardous snags (dead trees) in the yard for primary cavity-nesters, and provide birdhouses for secondary cavity-nesting species

Which birds will use a birdhouse?

That is determined by several factors, including:

- the size of birdhouse (overall size, as well as depth)
- the size of the entry hole
- the height at which the birdhouse is mounted
- the amount of surrounding vegetation (lack of, presence of, size of, etc.), and
- the habitat adjacent to your yard, in your neighborhood.

When you know a bird species' requirements, then you can look for suitable locations to mount the birdhouse, or nest box, in your yard. Your birdhouse could be mounted on a freestanding post or on a tree. For recommendations on building birdhouses and nest boxes, see our free publication "Helping Cavity-nesters in Florida" on the Web at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW058>. This publication will help you decide on the best birdhouse (nest box) design for the species you see in your yard, or want to attract, and the proper placement of the birdhouse in your yard.

Other articles can be found on our *Landscaping for Wildlife* Web page at <http://www.wec.ufl.edu/extension>. In addition, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology provides dimensions for nest boxes for many different bird species on their Web page called *The Birdhouse Network*, at <http://watch.birds.cornell.edu/nest/home/index>