WATCHABLE WILDLIFE

Watching wildlife is a common pastime for a growing number of citizens. Experts say the community economic value of wildlife viewing rivals the economic impact of golf. While some folks travel to far away places to see exotic species of birds and wildlife, you don’t have to go so far away.

Florida has the third most diverse wildlife population of any state in the nation. Some can only be found in natural areas, but many species of birds, butterflies and animals abound in your own neighborhood.

Wildlife, like people, have basic needs for shelter, food and water.

Formal landscapes with very simplistic, structured designs are pleasing to the eye, but diversity in the yard is the best way to attract wildlife. Large expanses of single species of plants don’t attract as many types of creatures. Include a variety of trees, shrubs, groundcovers, wildflowers, and natural grasses for your landscape.

Grow plants that mature at varying heights to provide hiding places and nesting sites for the widest variety of species. Thorny plants are good for many birds because they help to protect baby birds from predators. Brush piles, low vines, and groundcovers provide low places for many animals to nest, feed or hide.

Dead trees and logs also provide homes for animals. Leave them if they don’t threaten property damage. Remove the limbs and leave the main trunk allowing it to decompose on its own. Woodpeckers, lizards, owls, possums, and many insects find their homes in the rotting wood.

In order for wildlife to thrive, plentiful food in a type preferred by the creatures is required.

Bird feeders are popular additions to landscapes. The type of feed you put out determines the species of birds you will attract.

Use plants as natural feeders to attract wildlife. Many provide fruits and nuts that are seasonal food. Select plants that produce foods at different times of the year for the best smorgasbord for your feathered and furry friends. Insects are food for a variety of wildlife. Some feed on plants, but may not cause significant damage to them. Some insects feed on other insects and never damage plants.

Pesticides used in the landscape can be harmful to wildlife and their foods. Kill the bugs and you reduce the food supply for many animals. Try to use least toxic pest control methods such as insecticidal soap, oil sprays or tolerance.

*Bacillus thuringiensis* is a naturally occurring bacteria which kills caterpillars, the immature form of moths and butterflies. It is mass produced and sold commercially by such names as BT, Thuricide, Biotrol and Dipel. It is commonly used as a least toxic pest control method for these chewing pests. Other naturally occurring caterpillar controls include birds, predatory stinkbugs, big-eyed bugs and lizards (and my Brittany dog). Avoid the use of this product if you are growing plants for caterpillars to eat so they can grow into butterflies.

Water is also necessary for animals. Consider having a wet area in your yard. Butterflies drink moisture from muddy soil rather than from open water puddles. Moving water such as a fountain, waterfall or micro-sprinkler can be attractive as well as functional.

Wildlife watchers know that pets can harass wildlife so keep your favorite creatures under command in the landscape and in natural areas.
Design your landscape to include food, water and shelter for your wild friends. It will be a source of great enjoyment for all of you.

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