

HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

HOLIDAY HOLLY

Deck the woods with boughs of holly! There are many native hollies that can provide valuable wildlife food and habitat in your yard and decorations for your home during the holidays. Add some to your landscape this winter and you and wildlife will enjoy them year after year.

Wildlife needs a variety of foods throughout the year. Holly fruits are a favorite winter food of many birds and mammals in the woods and in your yard.

The term "mast" is a general term that refers to the reproductive bodies of plants and is often associated with wildlife food sources. Mast is often divided into categories of "hard mast" and "soft mast". "Hard mast" is the production of hard-shelled seeds, such as acorns and hickory nuts. "Soft mast" describes seeds that are covered with fleshy fruit, as in apples and berries. Mast may also include seeds and fruits of all other plants such as grasses, herbs (forbs), pines, hardwoods, and fungi. Holly berries are considered soft mast for wildlife.

Natural forest stands are composed of a variety of overstory tree species and understory shrub species. Species diversity protects forests from insect damage and disease. It also improves soil fertility, and is essential for providing wildlife with food and shelter. By understanding the importance of managing for a variety of plants, you are taking the first step towards maximizing mast production. By selecting a variety of landscape plants that produce various types of mast, you can support a diverse population of resident and visiting wildlife.

Nutritional needs of wildlife change from season to season, depending on whether they are preparing for reproduction, growth, migration, or hibernation. A diversity of mast producers can fulfill the changing needs of wildlife species. Nuts are very high in carbohydrates, making them an important energy source especially in the colder months. Mushrooms and other fungi, legumes, grasses and forbs are very high in protein. These plants are especially important to reproducing animals and their young during spring and summer.

An example of seasonal variation of nutrients is evident in berry-producing plants. Berries of summer-bearing plants are high in sugar and carbohydrates, while the berries of fall and winter-bearing plants are high in lipids (fats). This seasonal difference meets the changing nutritional needs of wildlife through the year.

Mast diversity and increased mast production can be achieved by creating a varied landscape. Integrate fruits, nuts and grasses that produce edible parts for wildlife. In a pasture you may disc strips for planting forbs and legumes. Discing also creates a seed bed for establishment of local tree and shrub species. Leaving snags and logs to rot will provide fungi, a valuable protein source in spring and summer.

Crowded stands of overstory trees produce poor mast yields and varieties. The storms this summer opened up the canopy to allow light to reach more of each tree's crown, where it will stimulate more mast production. The canopy should also be open enough to allow light to reach the ground, where it will encourage the growth of desirable understory vegetation. Similarly, a dense midstory provides little mast, and suppresses the development of understory growth. A diverse vertical structure (vegetation growth from understory to canopy) supports more species than if most of the vegetation is in one stratum (e.g., a dense canopy).

In wildlands, plant diversity and vertical structure is achieved by thinning, prescribed burning, and mechanical or chemical treatments. In your landscape, you prune, trim, weed and use herbicides; similar strategies on a smaller scale.

Contact the UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension Service at 321-697-3000 for information on hollies and other mast plants adapted to your landscape or farming situation.

Think of what you do and how you do it and a few changes may increase the diversity of wildlife you see while providing needed food, roosting, nesting and resting for our native and visiting wildlife. Landscape plants are wonderful gifts for the holidays for your family and furry and feathered friends to enjoy.

Best wishes for a safe and joyful holiday season and a healthy and prosperous New Year!

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Date: November 28th, 2004**