Would you like free help controlling mosquitoes in your neighborhood? Do you want to attract butterflies to your yard? Do you enjoy watching birds? Attracting wildlife to your yard can provide you with beauty, entertainment, and even pest control.

The Florida Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program offers ideas on how to landscape for wildlife, and if your landscape includes at least 10 square yards that are landscaped for wildlife, your yard can also be a "certified habitat". Landscaping for wildlife doesn't mean you need to have a "wild" looking yard; even formal style landscapes can provide for wildlife when design and plant selection are considered. You can also be selective about the types of wildlife that you attract to your yard by choosing the appropriate habitat features. (For example, not everyone appreciates snakes and raccoons!)

Creating a wildlife habitat involves more than just hanging a bird feeder, but the effort is well worth it. Habitats include three crucial elements: food, water, and shelter. By providing a habitat, you are giving animals a home, instead of just attracting animals that live elsewhere to your yard. If your yard isn't a habitat, you are relying on someplace else to produce the wildlife you wish to attract. That wildlife may not exist if "someplace else" becomes developed or altered.

With wildlife habitats being rapidly overtaken by humans in Florida, many species are being pushed into "threatened" and "endangered" categories. The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences lists over 400 plants and animals in our state that fit those titles. Does it really matter if a few species drop out of existence, when there are so many other plants and animals? If for no other reasons than our own human survival, health, and economic success, the answer is yes.

In the Florida Keys, human impacts are killing coral reefs that are habitat to 100's of species of fish, causing decline in fish populations, including commercial fish species (Source: National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration). This cannot be a good thing for a location that has a multi-million dollar tourism industry that includes wildlife-based sports like snorkeling and sport fishing.

Wild relatives of our food crops and ornamental plants often contain genetic material that is resistant to disease and harsh environments, making them valuable breeding material for our future food and landscape plants. Nearly 40% of prescribed drugs in the US are derived from plants, even though only about 2% of known plant species have been screened for medicinal value (Source: US Fish and Wildlife Service). The fruit of our own native Saw Palmetto is used to make the valuable medication Permixon. How many plants will become extinct before we have the chance to discover the benefits they hold? All living things make up complex networks, and if one thing is eliminated, then other things are displaced or perhaps eliminated also. The US Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that for every one plant species lost, there are 30 other species of plants and animals that are lost also!

Native Florida plants can play a valuable role in any landscape, but especially in wildlife landscapes. Native plants thrive in Florida's extreme conditions and are resistant to many common Florida pests, so they require minimal maintenance. Many native creatures depend on specific native plants to survive. The caterpillars of the Zebra Swallowtail Butterfly, for example, will only eat the native Paw Paw plant. Local nurseries now carry native plants because of the increasing demand for these easy-to-grow plants. (Find Florida native plant nurseries here)

While most people will admit that watching wildlife and having a nice landscape view are enjoyable, it goes a little deeper than that. Texas A&M's Robert Ulrich, has found that simply viewing plants reduces stress, anger, blood pressure, and muscle tension. E.O. Wilson, Harvard biologist, and Stephen Kellert, Yale professor, have made popular the term "biophilia", which refers to the hypothesis that people have an
innate connection to nature. This connection to the natural world is strained by our urban environments, but can be rediscovered in your own backyard.

The Florida Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program is unique among other habitat certification programs because it offers personalized help. The Florida Yards & Neighborhoods staff offers landscape consultations at your home to help you plan your wildlife habitat. $10.00 covers the consultation visit and a fun yard sign designating your yard as a certified wildlife habitat. Click here to learn more about this rewarding program. To receive an application for Florida Backyard Wildlife Habitat certification, and a free Planting a Refuge for Wildlife book, call or come by the Osceola County Extension.

Free Programs: Landscape Pest Management-Aug. 15 @ St. Cloud Library, 6:30pm; Aug. 20 @ Poinciana Library, 6:30pm; and Aug. 22 @ Central Library, 6:30pm. Call 407-846-4181 to register.

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Date: August 04th, 2002