

Create a Backyard Wildlife Habitat

**by Kim Gabel, Environmental Horticulture Agent
UF/IFAS/Monroe County Extension Services**

Imagine songbirds singing in your trees and colorful butterflies floating through your backyard. By providing food, shelter, water, and space for the Florida Keys wildlife, you can create a backyard habitat that will provide you and your family with hours of enjoyment.

A wildlife habitat provides for desirable plants and animals that have been displaced by development. As you consider objectives for your new or existing landscape, add a few features for wildlife to bring your yard alive with birds, butterflies, and beneficial insects.

- **Tip 1: Limit the amount of turfgrass area**

Wildlife consider lawn as a “concrete jungle” because it provides very little food and cover. When developing a wildlife habitat, look for low traffic areas, such as corners of the yard and plant native trees or shrubs, ground cover plants, wildflowers, or a butterfly garden.

- **Tip 2: Increase vertical layering**

Is your landscape a combination of trees and grass and nothing in between? Planting a variety of native trees, shrubs, and ground covers creates “vertical layering.” Vertically layered habitat provides food and cover opportunities for wildlife. For example, birds will visit these areas by first perching in the tree canopy to survey the area for signs of danger and food, then will move into the understory of trees and shrubs, for cover and to eat the available seeds, fruits or insects.

- **Tip 3: Provide snags and brush piles**

Snags or dead trees can be left in place if they don't threaten structures or parking areas. Birds use the snags for perches, nesting, and sources of insects for food. A brush pile placed near other vegetation provides excellent cover and feeding opportunities for mammals, birds, and butterflies.

- **Tip 4: Provide water**

Provide a clean, fresh water source for your backyard wildlife habitat. A birdbath that captures rainwater or that you replenish will suffice. Dump and clean the container every few days and refill it to prevent mosquito breeding and bacterial contamination. For the butterflies, create a “puddling” station. Put out a flower pot saucer of wet sand, keep the sand moist, and watch the butterflies siphon the moisture off the sand.

- **Tip 5: Plant Native vegetation**

If you plant native vegetation throughout your landscape, the wildlife will come in search of food. By incorporating native plants that are adapted to the Keys alkaline soils, they will require less fertilizer, pesticides, and water than introduced ornamental landscaping. Plant native trees, shrubs, and palms for attracting birds and butterflies to your backyard. Consider the following possibilities:

Large Trees: Gumbo Limbo, Pigeon Plum, Torchwood, Blolly, Seagrape, Coffee Colubrina, Willow Busic, Wild Tamarind, Paradise Tree

Small Trees: Marlberry, Jamaica Caper, Stoppers, Firebush, Bahama Cassia, Black bead, Wild Lime

Shrubs: Beautyberry, Necklace Pod, Wild Coffee, Spicewood, Cocoplum, Wax Myrtle, Florida Myrsine, native Lantana

Ground covers: Blue Porterweed, Coontie, Golden Creeper

Palms: Silver Palm, Royal Palm, Sabal Palm, Thatch Palm

- **Tip 6: Provide bird feeders and houses**

Place bird feeders of different designs and seed types to attract a wider diversity of birds. Locate feeders near cover (bushes, trees) as this provides protection to escape predators. Birdhouses in your yard will provide nesting and roosting shelter.

- **Tip 7: Remove invasive exotic plants**

Invasive exotic trees, shrubs, and ground covers displace native vegetation. Some examples of invasive exotics in the Keys are: Brazilian Pepper, *Schinus terebinthifolius*, Australian Pine, *Casuarina equisetifolia*, Latherleaf, *Colubrina asiatica*, Beach Naupaka, and *Scaevola sericea*.

- **Tip 8: Manage pets**

Wildlife will not be attracted to your yard if free roaming cats and dogs harass them.

- **Tip 9: Reduce pesticide use**

Anything you can do to reduce pesticides in your yard will benefit wildlife. Most pesticides do not target *one* species of insect, and can kill both harmful and beneficial insects. Identify your insect before spraying, then if you need to spray, use the least toxic control method such as insecticidal soap or horticultural oil. Spot treat only where the problem is and scout the area on a weekly basis for new pest problems.

Information for this article can be found in “Landscaping Backyards for Wildlife: Top Ten Tips for Success.” You can view the article online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.