



Enhance your
backyard wildlife viewing
 with natural
habitat landscaping

A backyard meadow is any naturalized planting of wildflowers and bunch grasses growing in a sunny, open area.

By David Copps

Wildlife viewing is becoming ever more popular in Florida as people head to wildlife management areas, parks and refuges to experience the sights and sounds of Florida's wild treasures. But you don't have to travel far for good viewing. Homeowners can create great viewing opportunities in their own yards by providing the basic building blocks of good habitat – meadows, mixed hedges, thickets and woodlands. When combined in the landscape, you can create patterns that are attractive to a wide variety of songbirds, butterflies and other critters for close-up viewing throughout the year.

Meadows

A meadow is any naturalized planting of wildflowers and bunch grasses growing in a sunny, open area. Planting even a small patch of meadow provides a rich variety of seeds and insects for birds and food plants for butterflies and their larvae. Bluebirds,

chipping sparrows, palm warblers and phoebes are a few of the birds that may visit a backyard meadow. Gulf fritillaries, zebra longwings and cloudless sulphurs are some of the butterflies that enliven the garden as they flit from plant to plant to lay their eggs or search for nectar.

As the forms, colors and textures of meadow foliage change throughout the year, so do the activities of wildlife that live here. Spring is the time for lower-growing wildflowers including black-eyed Susan, coreopsis, gaillardia and butterfly weed. The insects attracted to these flowers provide an important source of protein for baby birds. Bluebirds will wait patiently on a nearby perch then suddenly plummet down into the meadow to snatch unsuspecting grasshoppers for their hungry nestlings.

In the summer, native grasses such as blue-stems and Indian grass begin to make a show. By



WILLIAM J. WEBER

Above: Raccoons often spend their days resting in trees.
Below: Mixed hedges and thickets provide food and shelter to a variety of wild creatures throughout the year.

October, their flowering stalks are thrust high above the leaves that have taken on wonderful shades of russet, tan and gold. The grasses support the tall, lanky fall-blooming wildflowers including narrow-leaf sunflower, blazing star and goldenrod.

The seed stalks of both grasses and wildflowers last through the winter, providing a much-needed food source for over-wintering songbirds. Flocks

of goldfinches will suddenly arrive to feast in these patches and then disappear just as quickly. Sparrows are fun to watch as they work their way down the stalks of bluestem grasses picking out the tiny seeds. Chickadees do the same on dried sunflower seed heads, bobbing up and down as they pick and probe for their meal.

Mixed hedges and thickets

Mixed hedges along property boundaries and dense thickets in corners produce wildlife activity throughout the year. A tight grouping of cherry laurel, red cedar, cabbage palm and wild plum, laced with vines such as yellow jessamine and wild grape, provides thick cover needed to escape predators and harsh winter winds. Thickets and mixed hedges are the preferred nesting sites for cardinals, mockingbirds and brown thrashers. These birds will often give away their nest locations by returning to the same location time and again with beaks full of twigs or grasses.

Many of the shrubs and small trees that make up mixed hedges and thickets produce fruits and seeds that are relished by songbirds and small mammals. A variety of foods can be provided throughout the year by combining deciduous and evergreen species that flower and fruit at different seasons. Beautyberry, yaupon holly and sumac provide much needed high-energy food for songbirds during the winter when there are fewer protein-rich insects to feast upon.

Wax myrtle is a particularly good addition to the mixed hedge. The female plant has small, hard fruits that yellow-rumped warblers and ruby-crowned kinglets relish. Plant some nearby and you'll be rewarded



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with the sights and sounds of these voracious feeders until the very last fruits are stripped clean.

Woodland

Woodlands, or hammocks as we call them in Florida, provide for an incredible wealth of wildlife. Homeowners can enhance their viewing success by creating a mini-woodland under a large shade-tree or group of trees where turf grass is hard to grow. When leaves fall, let them stay on the ground to build up a rich carpet of mulch. Plant a variety of understory trees, shrubs and groundcovers to create a multi-layered woodland structure. More layers provide more feeding and nesting opportunities.

Brown thrashers and towhees are particularly fun to watch as they scratch and thrash leaves and twigs in their quest for grubs and spiders. Raccoons and possums often spend their days resting in trees. Recently, while scanning the tops of trees for migrating warblers, I spotted a trio of young raccoons huddled together in an old squirrel's nest in the crotch of a large pine tree in my yard.

If possible, preserve all cavity trees on your property. Scan them as part of your daily viewing routine, and you'll eventually be rewarded with the sights and sounds of one of the many wildlife species that require cavities for resting or raising young. Over the years, I've seen barred owls, flying squirrels, wood ducks and a variety of woodpeckers in tree cavities throughout my neighborhood.

Backyard habitat design

When designing a wildlife viewing landscape, arrange the various components so they are easy to see from your house and fun to walk through. Children enjoy roaming and exploring along paths cut through meadows and thickets. Backyard habitats provide them with opportunities to interact with nature – an important step towards developing a sense of environmental stewardship.

Habitat landscaping will attract a wide variety of wildlife to your yard. By creating a feeding and watering station, you can entice many of them to come near for close-up viewing.

Provide feeders for seed and suet along with a bird bath or misting pool for songbirds and containers with nectar and host plants for butterflies.

When you provide for wildlife with habitat landscaping, they'll give back with sounds, colors and interesting behaviors that will enrich your life through the seasons and through the years. **FW**

David Copps is a landscape designer and naturalist. He has a master's degree in landscape architecture and owns David Copps Landscape Design in Tallahassee. He specializes in the design and management of natural habitat gardens that bring children close to nature and protect Florida's water, wildflowers and wildlife. Contact him at meadowman3@yahoo.com.

Plant list



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Homeowners can enhance their viewing success by creating a mini-woodland under a large shade tree or group of trees where turf grass is hard to grow.

Meadow

Spring blooming

Blackeyed Susan	<i>Rudbeckia hirta</i>
Coreopsis	<i>Coreopsis</i> spp.
Indian blanket	<i>Gaillardia pulchella</i>

Fall blooming

Narrow-leaf sunflower	<i>Helianthus angustifolia</i>
Blazing star	<i>Liatris</i> spp.
Goldenrod	<i>Solidago</i> spp.
Switch grass	<i>Panicum virgatum</i>
Bluestem grass	<i>Andropogon</i> spp.
Muhly grass	<i>Muhlenbergia capillaries</i>
Love grass	<i>Eragrostis</i> spp.

Mixed hedge and thicket

Yaupon holly	<i>Ilex vomitoria</i>
Wax myrtle	<i>Myrica cerifera</i>
Chickasaw plum	<i>Prunus angustifolia</i>
Black cherry	<i>Prunus serotina</i>

Woodland

Canopy

Oaks	<i>Quercus</i> spp.
Hickories	<i>Carya</i> spp.
Southern magnolia	<i>Magnolia grandiflora</i>

Understory

Dogwood	<i>Cornus florida</i>
Sparkleberry	<i>Vaccinium arboretum</i>
Eastern hophornbeam	<i>Ostrya virginica</i>

Shrubs

American beautyberry	<i>Callicarpa americana</i>
Highbush blueberry	<i>Vaccinium corymbosum</i>
Saw palmetto	<i>Serenoa repens</i>

Groundcover

Partridgeberry	<i>Michella repens</i>
Witch grass	<i>Dicanthelium</i> spp.
Spike grass	<i>Chasmanthium</i> spp.