

Friday's Feature**By****Theresa Friday**

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Attract birds to your yard for hours of enjoyment

During the winter months many migratory birds arrive in Florida. Over the past few weeks, the orange-breasted American Robin has been a common sight along the Gulf Coast.

Watching wildlife can be an enjoyable pastime. With the right plants and landscaping, you can turn your yard into an inviting place for birds and other wildlife.

To attract and maintain a bird population, a habitat should provide for the bird's basic needs. This includes food, cover, and water.

Food can be provided in the form of plants that bear seed, fruit, foliage or flowers. Flowers of some species attract insects, which are in turn eaten by many types of birds.

Some favorites in the landscape include natives such as the American beautyberry. Clusters of bright purple berries are eaten by woodpeckers, mockingbirds, cardinals and other bird species.

Wax myrtle is another favorite. This plant is either male or female and you need a female if you want a lot of berries. The fruits on wax myrtle are very tiny, bluish-gray in color and are produced on big plants by the thousands. These provide an important winter food source for migrating birds. If you have wax myrtles that are full of berries you can sit close by and see a wide assortment of birds coming in to have a feast.

Birds require a place of cover or shelter. They require protection from inclement weather (sun, heat, wind, and rain) and natural predators. This is why multi-stem plants that form a dense canopy are preferred by birds.

The dense canopy also provides an ideal environment for nesting. Since birds require shelter year-round, the yard should have a mix of deciduous and evergreen plants. Evergreen plants include broadleaf evergreens, such as holly, and conifers, such as red cedar. Several references suggest that at least 25 percent of the trees and shrubs should be evergreen.

Don't forget about larger trees either. Live oaks and other type of oaks produce generous amounts of acorns and these ripen during the fall and early winter season and provide plenty of food for birds, squirrels and other animals.

Don't forget palms either. Many of our palms whether they are native or exotic produce large amounts of fruit if they are in good health. These fruits which come in a variety of colors and sizes provide important sources of food for birds, squirrels and other types of wildlife.

A source of fresh water is also necessary to maintain your bird population. The water source should be shallow (no more than two to three inches deep) and replaced on a regular basis. Running water, such as a shallow fountain, is the ideal water source. The water source should be elevated or in the middle of an open area to minimize predation by cats and other animals. An elevated bird bath or fountain is ideal.

As you create a new landscape or improve your existing one, add a few features for wildlife and bring your yard to life with birds, butterflies and beneficial insects. Just remember that food, water and cover attract wildlife, but providing habitat is not enough. You also need to maintain your yard so the impact it has on the environment is minimal.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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