

One Small Garden , Lots of Wildlife Just Outside the Window

Donna Legare
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Photos to be credited to: *Mahonia bealei*, Oregon grape holly, NC State University . Firebush, *Hamelia patens*, Texas A&M University Horticulture.

When we bought our home twelve years ago, it had a traditional planting of boxwoods and azaleas across its front foundation. We removed those plants years ago and replaced them with plants that would bring birds and butterflies up close to the windows. Now when I have to sit at my office desk, I see lots of wildlife up close, utilizing the plants we have provided for them.

Right now, a very pretty blueberry bush serves as an accent plant at the corner of the house. Its berries are ripening daily and we are more than glad to share the delicious harvest with cardinals and other songbirds. Directly in front of the windows, we planted several Oregon grape plants (*Mahonia bealei*) that sport showy yellow blossoms in winter followed by dark blue fruit in March and April. Each year, mockingbirds, cardinals, a large flock of cedar waxwings and occasionally a catbird devour the fruit.

A low birdbath sits in front of the Oregon grapes and is regularly used by chickadees, titmice, brown thrashers, cardinals and many others. Around the birdbath are red pentas for hummingbirds and butterflies. Off to one side is a cardinal guard or firespike, which has showy red blooms in late summer and early fall. It is a true hummingbird magnet and butterflies, particularly sulfurs and tiger swallowtails, are drawn to its nectar. To the other side is a gorgeous firebush (*Hamelia patens*) along with a large planting of *Salvia guaranitica*. The firebush has tubular orange flowers in mid summer through frost, while the vivid blue salvia flowers begin to bloom in April. Both are top hummingbird plants.

Across the lawn from the office window is a huge live oak where wildflowers and native trees and shrubs

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coexist in its shade. On the edge grows a thicket of sassafras, chickasaw plum, red buckeye and wild grape. If you look carefully at the leaves of sassafras in summer and fall, you will find some folded leaves. Peek within the fold to find a cute little caterpillar that will become a stunning spicebush swallowtail butterfly. The chickasaw plum bears fruit for wildlife; the fruit makes great preserves as well. The bright red flowers of red buckeye in March draw early migrating hummingbirds to its nectar and the buckeye nuts are a favorite of squirrels.

The live oak itself is a huge draw for wildlife. It bears bountiful acorns in autumn for squirrels, woodpeckers, bluejays and other birds and its huge resurrection fern-covered limbs harbor abundant insects for warblers and other insect eating birds to hunt. It has also provided great limbs for climbing children over the years.

**Donna Lagare is co-owner of Native Nurseries, a volunteer at Birdsong Nature Center butterfly garden, and serves on the Leon County Environmental Horticulture Advisory Committee for UF-IFAS.*