

## Wildlife Food for the Fall



*Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: American beautyberry is among the most common of native shrubs which provide food for wildlife and beauty for our landscapes.*

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**A**utumn is the season of plenty for wildlife. Many shrubs and trees offer berries, seeds or nuts to lure wildlife to aid in their distribution, providing a planting service for future generations.

Unfortunately, of six common non-native trees and shrubs that have been planted by homeowners to provide berries for birds, five are on the Florida invasive exotic pest species list. The four worst, ligustrum, coral ardisia, nandina and Chinese tallow tree are category I invasives. This is described as “altering native plant communities..., and changing ecological functions.” Eleagnus (silverthorn) is a Class II invasive and pyracantha is not on the invasive list. Pyracantha is a beautiful fall/winter berry provider utilized by mockingbirds, robins and others.

Fortunately there are many beautiful and interesting native plants that produce seeds or berries for wildlife. River oats has a distinctive, grassy foliage and its “oats” ripen in September resembling the heads on sea oats. A large pot with river oats is on my front porch and my family gets to watch cardinals pick and eat the seeds. River oats is best used in rich, moist soil and shade. Keep in mind that it does spread, so choose a spot where you can enjoy a mass planting.

Hearts-a-bustin’ and arrowwood are native shrubs for shade. You will get more berries if you plant them in light shade. Hearts-a-bustin’s red berries ripen in September and the shrub sports peachy fall foliage as well. Plant two for better pollination and heavier fruiting. Arrowwood’s blue-black berries ripen about July. It is a large, ten foot tall deciduous shrub with bright reddish foliage in fall. The straight stems are great for roasting marshmallows and our bush has served our family well during backyard campfires.

Another shrub for shade is bluestem palmetto. This 6’ X 6’ palm has striking dark blue-green fronds. It can be used as a specimen in very shady areas. The plants in my back yard develop gracefully arching eight foot long

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stalks with black berries that are eaten by many birds. The stalks are nice perching spots for birds waiting to use the feeders.

In a more sunny location, American beautyberry is a good choice for offering clusters of bright purple berries in September. This shrub is familiar to many folks since it is common along roadsides.

Trees also produce valuable berries or seeds for wildlife. In sun, magnolia has fragrant blossoms and prized red berries that dangle on silk threads from the cone. In a shaded yard, bluebeech and hophornbean are two small, thirty foot trees that produce interesting looking seed pods. Blue beech is reported as utilized by wood duck, quail, yellow-rumped warblers and others. One of Tallahassee's signature trees not only produces people pleasing white blossoms in springtime and colorful red fall foliage, but also plentiful red berries eaten by bluebird, cardinal, catbird, robin and our state bird – the mockingbird. Do you know the tree? Dogwood. Plant it in light shade.

Pines, oaks, sweetgum, hickory, American beech and probably every other native tree provides something of value for wildlife. A tree may provide seeds and berries, nesting habitat or cover, but it could also provide an indirect benefit. Every plant is attacked or eaten by some organism and these organisms are in turn eaten by others. Remember the food chain and food web from biology classes?

You could plant a magnificent mockernut hickory to provide nuts for squirrels which might, in turn, become a meal for a red-tailed hawk. The leaves of your hickory tree will also be food for the hickory horn devil, a devilish looking caterpillar which will transform into a stunning royal walnut moth. Your hickory tree could become the egg laying grounds of this russet and yellow moth that has a wingspan of four to five inches.

A black cherry tree not only has berries for birds, but tent caterpillars will often infest it to eat leaves in the spring. The caterpillars would then become food for the yellow-billed cuckoo and other birds. Keep the big picture in mind, knowing that all native trees and shrubs are valuable to native wildlife in one way or another.

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