

How to Have Fireflies in Your Backyard



Photo by Dr. James Lloyd, UF: *Photinus ignitus* lights up the night

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What child hasn't stumbled after a fading yellow blink in the landscape as dusk descends? Most of us have chased, or at least admired, fireflies or lightning bugs at some point in our life. They're just one of nature's wonders. So it's only natural that we may miss the summer nights when it seemed the whole night was lit up by bright flickers. It is becoming increasingly difficult for these insects to survive in our world. But just as people attract butterflies to their yards, we can work to attract lightning bugs!

I never knew how complex fireflies were until I took a course at the University of Florida on their natural history and met Dr. James Lloyd, who has made a life's career studying these intriguing creatures. They are not flies or bugs, but are beetles (order *Coleoptera*). Just like there are many distinct butterfly species, there are also many firefly species, including 56 species found in Florida.

Fireflies have developed an amazing method of communicating using bioluminescence. Each species has a unique code, or flash pattern, that they use to find a mate of their particular species. Fireflies need darkness to see and understand their fellow fireflies' flashes.

To help fireflies, as individuals, we can turn off all the outdoor lights around our houses – flood lights, porch lights, garage lights. As a neighborhood, we can try to reduce the number of street lights. Shields can also be put over street lights to direct the light onto the roads and away from yards and natural areas.

To attract a diverse firefly population, it is critical to provide a diversity of habitats. For example, some species spend much time in the upper branches of trees (*Photuris versicolor* & *Pyrractomena borealis*). Others live in shrub layers (*Photinus consanguineus* & *Pyrractomena angulata*). And still others live in grassy openings (*Photinus collustrans*).

So, at home we can allow edges of our yards to grow up into shrubby areas or plant shrubs at the edge of a lawn. Better yet, if you like a more natural look to your yard, let some of your grass grow up and become more wild. Neighborhoods can leave wooded areas and allow shrubby patches to grow up alongside grassy openings in parks or empty lots.

Finally, fireflies are insects, just like pesky spittlebugs or chinchbugs, so they are also susceptible to lawn chemicals. Larvae of *Photuris*, *Photinus*, and *Pyrractomena* genera spend time in the soil, where chemicals filtering down could have disastrous effects on firefly populations. Whenever possible, individuals and neighborhoods should avoid using pesticides on our lawns and parks. Neighborhoods that are really serious about bringing back more fireflies may even consider making ordinances against the use of pesticides. This could be beneficial both to fireflies and all the other neat critters out there!

We can enjoy lightning bugs for the first time or again after many years, if we take the initiative to invite them back into our yards, neighborhoods, and cities by offering them the habitat they need to survive right alongside our homes. Go outside and enjoy the night – try to identify some of those firefly species while you're out there. Or you can even “talk” to the fireflies with just a penlight and persistence!

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