Transforming a Traditionally Landscaped Yard into a Refuge for Wildlife

Photo by Donna Legare: Cabbage palm, needle palm, native ferns and woodland wildflowers live happily beneath the limbs of an aging live oak in our front yard on Ellicott Drive.

Donna Legare is the co-owner of Native Nurseries and a member of the Horticulture Advisory Committee for University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County, http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu

Thursday, February 25, 2010
Tallahassee Democrat

Over the last eighteen years, we have been converting our lawn and traditional landscape into a more hospitable habitat for wildlife. When we purchased our house, we were fortunate to already have large native trees like sweetgum, loblolly pine and live oak on the grounds, forming the overstory canopy. We began right away to plant the next layer of smaller trees such as dogwood, silverbell, red buckeye and parsley hawthorn which grow nicely under the high shifting shade created by the canopy trees.

We have been diligent at increasing the percentage of native plants on our property. When a rose-of-Sharon tree died in a prominent spot in our backyard, we replaced it with a native blue beech tree. This tree has pretty fall color, smooth gray bark and seeds that are eaten by birds.

Planting native plants is one of the most important things you can do in your yard to benefit native wildlife. In his book, Bringing Nature Home, entomologist David Tallamy explains that most native insects cannot or will not use alien (non-native) plants for food and rely instead on native plants. Since insects are the base of the food chain for birds and other wildlife, the importance of planting natives cannot be overemphasized. From my own personal observations, I surmise that every native plant is used in some way by wildlife, from invertebrates to mammals.
Establishing a hedge at the edges of your property also helps wildlife by providing cover. A mixed species hedge provides the greatest diversity. Ours is a mix of what was here before we moved in – sasanqua camellia, Burford holly, azalea, podocarpus and sweet viburnum. We removed the invasive nandina shrubs and replaced them with natives like Florida anise, Ocala anise, needle palm, agarista and blueberries.

We are slowly developing natural woodland areas in shady spots. We have added lots of native plants to our “woods” – coontie, bluestem palmetto, American beech, spicebush, arrowwood viburnum, native azaleas, Ashe magnolia, cabbage palm, mountain laurel and more. The woodland floor is carpeted by leaves and pine straw, known as leaf litter, where birds can scratch and hunt for worms and other invertebrates.

We planted a butterfly and pollinator garden in a sunny spot where we grow wildflowers, herbs and butterfly plants. Our small lawn contrasts nicely with the surrounding natural areas. It is easy to mow, requires little water and we ignore the weeds within by just mowing them along with the grass. On larger properties, you might consider allowing a section of lawn to go wild, mowing it just once or twice per year, which will increase the insect population.

Planting a natural yard is easy; maintenance presents greater challenges. We cannot keep up with weeding below our huge live oak where we have planted ferns and native wildflowers. After the first frost when the fern fronds have turned brown, we use a weed whacker to knock down the old fronds along with dewberry and other weeds. We hand pull invasive exotics and tree seedlings that appear. Even dogwood seedlings can be considered weeds when you have too many of them in a small area!

I view natural garden maintenance as exercise and a chance to get outside and up close with plants and animals in our yard. Learn to relax your attitude about what constitutes the perfect yard and garden and, most of all, take time to enjoy the fruits of your labor. Pick the blueberries, and watch and keep a record of what birds and other wildlife are eating in your yard.

###