Five Essential Perennials for Every Yard

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Firebush, a native perennial shrub, attracts hummingbirds and butterflies. It flowers summer through fall.

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After moving into a new house this year and with spring approaching, I am excited to plant a new perennial garden. Although my sprawling vegetable garden has taken up most of the space, I have saved choice spots for my favorite perennials. These five indispensable plants stand out for their low-maintenance needs, dependability, profusion of blooms, and, of course, their value to native birds, insects and butterflies.

My top three perennials are stellar Florida natives. Because native insects depend on native plants and these insects are the backbone of the fragile food-chain that sustains our wildlife, planting native perennials helps to support our diverse wildlife. More natives mean more birds and butterflies to enjoy!

*Heliopsis helianthoides* (Ox-eye Sunflower) is an often forgotten Florida native. Forming a compact two to four foot mound, it's the first perennial to bloom in the spring. It has sunny yellow, daisy-like flowers that continue non-stop until the first frost of winter kills it back. This tough, easy-to-grow plant is drought tolerant and carefree. It will grow in full to part sun. The butterflies love it.

*Hamelia patens* (Firebush) is another must-have Florida native. Firebush is a showy and fast growing perennial shrub that grows to four to six feet tall. It forms a nice mass of pretty foliage that becomes covered with clusters of long, tubular orange to red flowers that attract hummingbirds and butterflies. The blooms are followed by decorative fruits that more birds will enjoy, and beautiful reddish-orange fall foliage that you will enjoy. It readily blooms from summer to fall in the full sun, but will tolerate part shade at the cost of some blooms.
Echinacea purpurea (Purple Coneflower) is a well known Florida native that is renowned for its medicinal properties. Many of you gardeners are probably well familiar with it. This clump forming perennial grows up to three feet with its tall spikes of daisy-like, purplish-pink flowers that have orange, spiky central cones. The long-lasting blooms appear from summer through fall and attract a host of butterflies and pollinating insects.

Agastache foeniculum (Anise Hyssop), though not a Florida native, is a North American native. It is a classic plant for both herb gardens and borders. Anise hyssop is composed of erect branches of mint-and-licorice-scented leaves that end in fuzzy spikes of small lavender flowers. Flowers appear summer through fall. The plant grows to three to five feet tall and one foot wide. The edible flowers are charming crumbled into salads. They are also highly attractive to bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds. I like to have a few around my vegetable gardens to invite pollinators and other beneficial insects.

Salvia guaranitica/ (Black and Blue Salvia) is a South American native that has earned its place in my garden. The absolute favorite of hummingbirds, this eye catching salvia sports abundant, electric blue, tubular blooms with nearly black calyxes on flowering spikes that rise above a mass of three to four foot mint green foliage. The first salvia to bloom in late spring, this reliable perennial does best in full sun to part shade. It will bloom until frost, but it benefits from a mid summer pruning.

I hope you enjoy these stellar plants and the wildlife they bring to your yard. Happy planting!

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