

“Attracting Birds and Butterflies”
Teri Brockway, Florida Master Gardener
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by John Perian

Some gardeners are “Naturals,” regardless of where they live or where they plant their flowers, shrubs and trees. Many of us are not, though. That's where the likes of Master Florida Gardener Teri Brockway come to the rescue!

Despite the fact that almost all flora can be grown year round in this part of Florida, some plants just do not do well in the heat, humidity and rainfall during Hillsborough County's summer months. Even during the cooler months of the year, the weather here can be erratic and unpredictable as a result of climate change.

Another problem, as Teri explained, is the mistake of trying to plant flowers and shrubs in Florida that were meant for the soil and climate of “back home.” Those plants that are not indigenous to the tropical regions of South Florida usually succumb rather quickly to our growing conditions. “Our native plants are not as showy or as beautiful as the more colorful flora from Asia, Africa or South America,” she told the audience. “Native Florida plants are grown in our yards more for the benefit of Florida's wildlife and its environment.”

“Landscaping is my hobby,” Teri said. “I believe in having plants that have purpose, either for wildlife or for food.” The primary focus of her discussion at the April meeting was about how to create a refuge in our yards for wildlife. The size of each homeowner's haven for birds and butterflies doesn't have to be huge. She highlighted the fact that most homes in Sun City Center are not that spacious. And many neighborhoods have restrictions imposed by various Homeowner's Associations.

But, with the proper planning and plant choices, Teri said it's still possible to have a beautiful flower garden on a smaller scale, that is attractive to wildlife and us. “What do you want to visit your yard,” she asked. “Do you want pollinators? Do you want Hummingbirds? Do you want some of our more than 30 species of native Florida bees?”

Four Basic Elements for Wildlife
Think Like A Bird!

- Food
- Water
- Shelter
- Protection
- Space



Then she surprises many club members by mentioning the importance of Florida's 13 native species of Bats. One person interjected a comment about the occasional problem of Bats making their way into our attics. As Teri explained, that sometimes does happen. But most of the time Bats find roosting locations away from our homes.

“They are nature's insecticides,” she said. “They're really great to have around. She suggested having the people from the Bat Conservancy come to talk at our meetings. They have a fascinating presentation.”

Most Florida Bats roost in cracks, crevices, tree hollows, dead palm fronds. Even Spanish Moss. And they especially like “Bat Houses.” A single bat not much bigger than an adult male thumb can eat more than 3,000 bugs a night! And not a single one of Florida's flying mammals is a blood sucker or a fruit eater. Every one of our native bats are insectivores. Many garden centers sell ready-made Bat Houses. They can also be purchased “online.” No need to spray chemical insecticides that are toxic to the wildlife you are trying to attract...or to yourself.

It's counterproductive Teri explained, to want to attract wildlife to your flower garden and native shrubs and then feed them poison. Nature's way is better. Certain insects have had a symbiotic relationship with native plants for millions of years. They feed on the leaves but don't kill the plant. A good example is the Swamp Milkweed that hosts the Monarch Butterfly caterpillar. They need each other. Furthermore, birds not only eat fruit producing plants and shrubs, but they also eat the insects and worms that might attack your garden plants. “That's one of the reasons we don't have a lot of birds anymore,” she said, “because we've killed their food.”

So, local residents have to decide what they want to do. Do you want to grow native plants that will attract birds, butterflies, and other wildlife to your yard? Or do you want your yard to look like a manicured English style landscape, that won't attract anything. Also, Teri added, you have to decide if you are a gardener and are able to go outside and dig in the dirt. If not, you can keep your garden small, or you can always hire someone to plant it for you.

It's also a good idea when planning your garden, to place it where you will be able to see the birds and butterflies that come to your yard to feed. You also want to put it near a water source. Someplace that's easy for you to attach to a garden hose. Even if it's a native plant, it still requires a certain amount of tender loving care. Check with your HOA, especially if you want to place your garden in your front yard.

It's also important to know something about the plant you are buying and what its needs are regarding exposure to sunlight and watering. "You want to know what your plants are going to look like when they mature," she said. "You don't want to plant something near your driveway or curb that's going to be 50 feet tall, when it's finished growing. Just remember, if you trim them every month, you're cutting off the flowers and berries that the birds and other wildlife depend on. Let 'em grow!"

Teri suggests reading a book by author Nicola Ferguson that's called "Right Plant...Right Place." It's an excellent reference guide for gardeners. More than 1,500 plants are categorized in the book, according to growing conditions, purpose, and appearance. It's full of plant information, she said, about flowers and other flora that will grow in Florida.

"And only fertilize the amount your plant needs," she said. "Over fertilizing during our long growing season can actually weaken the plant. And most of our native plants need hardly any fertilizer at all."

Another factor to take into consideration is Mulch for your new plants. "White stones are not mulch," she said, tongue in cheek. "Many years ago, back in the day, someone thought that adding stones around shrubs and trees was a great thing. They are probably the worst thing possible for your plants." She states, "First of all the stones have no nutritional value for a plant. And have you ever touched those white stones in the summer? They're very warm. What they're doing is cooking the roots of your plants."

Older plants on your property likely already had established root systems when the stones were added. Teri said she removed the stones and raked them towards her home's foundation and away from the plant bed. After her plants were in the ground, she added mulch to keep the soil around the plants from drying out.

One of the best kinds of mulch comes from the invasive nonnative Melaleuca Trees. They are originally from Australia. They are commonly referred to as the "Paperbark Tea Tree." Here in Florida, it displaces native vegetation, creates a fire hazard, degrades wildlife habitat, and causes human health problems.

Fortunately, this invasive tree makes excellent mulch. It is also highly resistant to termites and other bugs and is durable in water. And, finally, the wind doesn't carry it away very easily. In order to get pure Melaleuca Mulch, though, it's suggested that it be purchased from a Native Florida Nursery. Pine Bark and Pine Needle mulch are also excellent choices. Just remember not to place the mulch too close to the tree trunk. Leave a bit of space, so the roots can breathe.

Teri received her certification as a Master Gardener from the University of Florida in 2017. She has been a gardening aficionado since she was a little girl near Buffalo, New York. She was a school teacher and has lived in Florida for 23 years. She has been a Sun City Center resident since 2004. She is also a member of the SCC Audubon Club and is past president of the SCC Elegant Gardener's Club.



Computer Resources

- [www. watermatters.org](http://www.watermatters.org)
- www.ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/plants
- [www.Audubon.org/native plants](http://www.Audubon.org/native_plants)
- www.fnps.org/native-plants
- www.flawildflowers.org/plant-selection-guide