

It's a Hummingbird!

By Jane Morse, University of Florida/IFAS Manatee County Extension Service



As I looked out over the dew-filled dawn of morning, searching for the sight of a giant swallowtail butterfly, to my amazement, wonder of wonders, I saw a hummingbird. This was the first ever sighting of a hummingbird at my home. It was happily flitting around my firebush plants, going from nectar-filled flower to flower. One had finally come!

Let's go back and discover what was done to attract these and other wonderful creatures to my backyard. Doing something to help the critters that have lost native habitat and to beautify the yard was important. Our yard goes from being wet mush in the summer to dry sand in the winter. Native plants were the best solution to fill all of these needs.

Native plants are the very best for attracting wildlife. Because they have evolved here in Florida for thousands of years, they have a direct connection to the wildlife that also evolved here. Native plants can best tolerate our soils and our extremes in weather, from super wet to super dry. There is a native plant for almost any situation.

To make the most of our small space, I chose plants that have great wildlife value. In the sunny, moist to wet area I planted a row of firebush (*Hamelia patens*), a couple of elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*), a dwarf variety of Walter's viburnum (*Viburnum obovatum*) and also some coreopsis (*Coreopsis leavenworthii*). In the shady area that tends to stay slightly flooded for days, I planted willow (*Itea virginica*) and in the sunny part, I planted Florida privet (*Forestiera segregata*).

One of the great things about Florida native plants is the abundance of nectar, fruit and cover they provide. The nectar attracts butterflies, birds and bugs. Yes, bugs are a good thing because many birds require insects for food. Hummingbirds, for one, must feed their babies insects. Insects are an extremely important part of a healthy landscape. Native plants also produce an abundance of fruits which provide food for birds and other critters. Many also provide dense cover which is a must for wildlife, as are food and water.

Let's get back to the hummingbird! They seek out red flowers. Some of their favorite native plants are Coral Bean, Firebush, Red Star Hibiscus, Swamp Azalea, Coral Honeysuckle, Trumpet Vine, Cross Vine, Butterfly Milkweed, Red Basil, Cardinal Flower, Obedient Plant, Scarlet Morning glory, Cypress Vine, Standing Cypress and Tropical Sage. Hummingbirds also seek out willows, which provide ideal nesting sites.

Blooming season is important if you want to keep hummingbirds around your home. Plant a variety of plants that bloom during different times of the year (especially fall and spring), and plant them in masses. Keep your plants free of pesticides. Pesticides destroy the insect food base vital to hummingbirds and their offspring, and may also contaminate the nectar they drink.

If you are thinking about feeders, they are much more work than planting actual plants. Plant nectar is also much better and more nutritious than the sugar-water used in feeders. Feeders need frequent changing (every 3-5 days). Clean feeders with hot water and vinegar - no soap. Feeders and plants must be kept away from windows so the birds don't crash into them and die.

For more **free** information about hummingbirds or creating a backyard habitat, call the University of Florida/IFAS Manatee Extension Service in Palmetto at (941) 722-4524, Monday-Friday, 9AM to 4 PM and ask to speak to a Master Gardener.

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