

How HOA's Can Help Support Wildlife and Mitigate the Effect of Urban Expansion Without Diminishing Property Values: It Doesn't Have to Look Like "Yards Gone Wild"

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Do you like birds, want to help keep Florida's water supply clean (and prevent it from running dry), but need to protect your property values and aesthetic appeal of your neighborhood? HOA codes and rules help protect what is for most their biggest investment and help reduce animosity with neighbors that have vastly different ideas of acceptable maintenance and taste. That is, after all, probably one of the reasons many people move into deed restricted neighborhoods. Wildlife-friendly and environmentally-friendly (Florida-friendly) yards do not have to look scrubby, weedy, and abandoned, nor do they have to look like patches of overgrown jungle wilderness. There are ways to change the landscape of a home which will reduce the need for maintenance and attract the local fauna while keeping the cultivated look of a well-managed neighborhood. Because many people value seeing wildlife, having yards in the neighborhood that attract wildlife may also make properties more appealing to buyers!

First, what is involved in making a yard bird friendly? Attracting and supporting wildlife involves providing them with resources needed to survive and breed. As development continues to expand natural areas diminish, so these backyard refuges become more and more important to our animal populations. The single change with the biggest effect in landscaping for wildlife is to swap exotic plants typically used in planted beds with native plants. Native plants have a variety of benefits, but for birds and other wildlife they provide a food source non-natives simply do not. Different species provide fruit, nuts, berries, and nectar for different birds at different times of the year. They also host a greater variety of insects, especially caterpillars, which are an essential food for many birds. Nesting pairs of chickadees need to find 6000-9000 caterpillars over a period of 16 days to successfully raise a brood of chicks. Just think of how many butterflies it takes to produce that many caterpillars! Native oaks support over 550 species of caterpillars (and butterflies and moths); exotic trees at best support half a dozen. Birds have a hard time successfully breeding in areas that lack native plants and natural food sources. And if they can't breed they die out. In addition, because native plants are adapted to local conditions, they will fare better and look better during periods of heat, drought, and fertilizer restrictions. Even though native plants host more types of insects they support more insect-eating animals and thus require less pesticides; non-natives are prone to infestations of different kinds of insects (pests) that are harder to control naturally. Allowing or encouraging homeowners to use native plants in their landscaping is one step in creating a yard that is both Florida-friendly and wildlife friendly.

Ok, but how can a bird-friendly yard with native plants blend in with the neighborhood? Well, homeowners can start by selecting native plants with characteristics desired by the HOA. Usually, this means shrubs that have neat forms or can be trimmed into well-maintained forms, trees with wide canopies for shade, and plants with colorful flowers and full foliage. They do exist - "drought-tolerant" does not mean "arid" or "scraggly" and "native" does not equate to "weedy"! You can take a look at Audubon's native plant database to browse plants that will grow well in our area and that appeal to your aesthetics. Next, homeowners can incorporate these plants in a traditional layout, one that is already existing or is similar to that found in other homes in the area. Neat beds around the perimeter of the house and along fences with a structured, layered look can be maintained with taller native plants or shrubs toward the back and shorter perennials or annuals in the front. Keeping or adding trees provides habitat, food, and gives the landscaping a mature appearance. Since grass requires high chemical maintenance and is of low value to wildlife, Florida and wildlife friendly yards may have more plant beds and less lawn than most yards. Consider allowing or encouraging homeowners to expand bedding areas.

Layouts that include deeply curved plant beds with ribbons of turf located along the roadway give the impression of larger grassy areas with traditional (but expansive) plant beds near the house. Visually, this can make a home's landscaping look even more planned and manicured.

Interested in doing a little more? Birds also require a fresh source of water and suitable habitat for nesting. Consider allowing homeowners to incorporate a water feature (pond or fountain or bird-bath) in their landscape plan. For some birds, leafy trees and shrubs provide nesting sites as well as hiding places so a lush landscape with native plants is enough. Others, like bluebirds, require hollow spaces – usually holes in dead trees. Most deed restrictions prohibit standing deadwood, so these species lack natural nesting sites. Many (excepting woodpeckers) will use birdhouses instead, so consider allowing homeowners to install these as a replacement. Feeders can also help support birds, especially when natural food sources are out of season and during fall and spring migrations. When attracting birds in neighborhoods be aware that collisions with glass poses significant risks – encourage homeowners to use window decals or decorations to make the glass more visible to wildlife.

Bird-friendly yards will become increasingly important in providing essential habitat to our wildlife as the county continues to grow and develop. These wildlife havens can be designed to be visually very similar to conventional landscaping. But while casual passersbys may not notice they are different, the butterflies and birds certainly will, bringing yards to life with darting flashes of color and sweet melodies. So, join our efforts and help make your neighborhood a beautiful refuge for birds.

Audubon Plants for Birds Webpage: <https://www.audubon.org/plantsforbirds>

Audubon Plants for Birds Database: <https://www.audubon.org/native-plants>

UF IFAS Pasco County Florida Friendly Landscaping Webpage: <https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/pasco/our-program-areas/florida-friendly-landscaping/>

