UF UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA | IFAS EXTENSION

Horticulture News

May/June 2011

Growing Bluebirds

by Candace Bridgewater - Nassau County Master Gardener

If you build it, they will come! There is little in the natural world more satisfying than to prepare and properly mount a bluebird house in just the right spot and wait to watch the sky blue male and his somewhat dimmer female come by to investigate with great interest, build a perfect nest, and raise their family.

Children love attracting bluebirds only a little bit more than their parents, and what better thing can we do for the world than help to add more flying ornaments to the skies and trees in our neighborhood?

If you have seen the rosey-breasted birds in your vicinity then you know you have the right habitat for Eastern Bluebirds. If you have a large grassy open yard and a shrub or tree or two then you are ready to set up a house. Golf course lots are perfect habitat as are roadsides and open rural fields with low ground cover. Though bluebirds are declining in numbers they readily accept your efforts at providing them with a home and quickly take up residence if the habitat is suitable.

Bluebird boxes can be purchased or easily made following directions from the North American Bluebird Society. The size of the box and the required round 1 ½" entrance hole are critical both in protecting the nestlings from weather and predators and to make the boxes unavailable to larger birds. Many decorative 'bird houses' are not appropriate for bluebirds and should not be used. See How to Build a Bluebird House.

Once the house is ready it must be mounted on a pole that will not allow easy access to raccoons, snakes or other predators. An appropriate baffle (stove pipe, metal cone or PVC) must be included – opening the box to find a satisfied rat snake in residence is no fun! Adding a metal ring the same size as the entrance hole will keep woodpeckers from drilling out a hole big enough for them to enter and utilize the box.

Once your house is installed or you've established a bluebird trail with multiple houses properly spaced 125 to 150 yards apart you should begin monitoring the houses weekly. The incubation period by the female is 12 – 14 days and the chicks remain in the nest 18 – 21 days before fledging. Talk about fast, satisfying results for those of us hoping each nest will produce two to three clutches a year by these hard-working parents. Monitoring should stop near fledging time so as not to frighten birds from the nest when they're too young to survive. A compact mirror or dental mirror can be utilized to see into the nest to count eggs and young. The nest material should be removed after each fledging.

Keeping records of egg clutches and young fledged is very satisfying to the monitor and supplying research information to the North American Bluebird Society. Now is the time to get a nest up and enjoy these remarkable creatures and their life cycle. This site has clear, simple directions for bluebird success:

http://www.nabluebirdsociety.org/

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Program Announcements

These programs are free to the public, so please call us at 904-491-7340 or e-mail *rljordi@ufl.edu* if you plan to attend. If response is too small, the program will be canceled.

Landscape Matters

Perennials

Wednesday May 11 10-11AM
Master Gardener Trish Kramer

Bulbs

Wednesday June 8 10-11AM
Master Gardener Shirley Lohman

Location

Demonstration Garden
Nassau County
Government Complex
96135 Nassau Place
Yulee, FL

Plant Clinics

Monday May 2 10AM- 2PM
Monday May 16 10AM-2PM
Monday June 13 10AM-2PM
Monday June 27 10AM-2PM

Location

Yulee Satellite Office
86026 Pages Dairy Road
Yulee, FL

Bring us your tired, diseased, insect infested plants yearning to be free of problems. when possible place your plant in a plastic bag to prevent chances of spreading issues to other plants. You will receive current researched based information on proper plant care, disease management and insect control. These sessions are free to the public. No registration required. Come anytime between 10AM - 2PM for expert advice.

Spotlight on Nassau Gardens

March Winner - Mary Ann & Merle Betts

Mary Ann and Merle Betts of Hilliard have 3 acres, solid with 60 varieties of Camellias. They have propagated these since the early 1970's. Some originated with the Gerbing Nursery varieties on Amelia Island. The Camellia pictured is "R.L.Wheeler". They are holding several other varieties.

April Winner - Wendy Edwards

This beautiful dogwood tree belongs to Wendy Edwards of Yulee.She is pictured here with her son Christopher. Dogwoods are not plentiful in our area as they are about four hours north, but nothing signifies spring like a blooming dogwood.

Master Gardener Program

Do you love plants, trees, and gardening? Would you enjoy volunteering your time to help teach youth and newcomers in your community? Then perhaps you should become a University of Florida/IFAS Master Gardener Volunteer! It requires 75 hours of volunteer time to be given to Nassau County Extension the first year and 35 hours every year thereafter. Ten training sessions held on Wednesdays will begin in the middle of August and end in November. Student CDs will cost $55. If you are interested and would like an application packet please call 879-1019 or 491-7340 or e-mail *rljordi@ufl.edu*. Interviews for the Master Gardener Program will be scheduled in mid-July and training will begin the first week of August.

Using Native Plants in the Landscape

Native plants are those that occur naturally in an area. Native species have evolved over time with the biological and physical factors specific to their region such as soil, climate, and rainfall.

Benefits

Native plants provide food and shelter for native wildlife. The great variety of plant species for all conditions carries a high habitat value. For a list of wildlife-friendly native plants, check out *Native Plants for Backyard Florida Habitats.* Check out the University of *Florida's Wildlife Extension* Web site for complete information on *Landscaping for Wildlife.*

Native plants help to restore regional landscapes. They are the best species adapted to local conditions that thrive with the least care and create a sense of place.

"Wherever I go in America, I like it when the land speaks its own language in its own regional accent."--Lady Bird Johnson, Wildflowers Across America (1993).

Using native plants promotes wise stewardship of the land and conservation for our natural areas. Native species are members of a community of plants, animals, and microorganisms that keep each other in check and won't harm natural areas.

Where do you find native plants for your yard? Well, first, please don't remove them from natural wild areas. Instead, visit the National Native Plant Nursery Directory online to find plant nurseries in your state that sell native plants.

Native Landscaping Principles

- Right Plant, Right Place--assess your local site conditions and select compatible plants whose ultimate size and shape fit your needs.
- Plant Diversity--using a variety of plants provides a more diverse wildlife habitat and more seasonal interest, and makes pest and disease damage less noticeable.
- Vertical Layers--a multi-layered approach to your lawn (e.g., using grass, ground cover, bushes or shrubs, and trees of different heights) creates a diverse habitat and provides more home cooling ability and cover for wildlife that utilize plants in different ways.

Beautyberry--berries
Callicarpa americana

Native Plant Species that Attract Wildlife

Sweetgum--seeds
Liquidambar styraciflua

Cabbage palm--fruit
Sabal palmetto

Live oak--mast (acorns)
Quercus virginiana

Longleaf pine--structure
Pinus palustris

Wax myrtle--berries
Myrica cerifera

May Checklist

Celosia

Citrus: Depending on citrus fertilizer label, apply fertilizer every six weeks or as directed. Check for citrus insects; apply horticulture oil if insects are detected. Check for disease; apply fungicide just at new leaf flush or after bloom drop. Maintain 2-3' unmulched area around citrus trees.

Fruit: Weed as needed. Apply 6-6-6 or 8-8-8 fertilizer to nectarine. Check irrigation to ensure it is working. Make repairs.

Flowers: Annuals to plant this month are celosia, coleus, coreopsis, crossandras, gaillardias, gazanias, hollyhocks, impatiens, kalanchoe, marigolds, nicotianas, ornamental peppers, pentas, portulacas, salvia, thunbergia alata, torenias, verbenas, periwinkles, and zinnias.

Culantro

Herbs: Anise, basil, bay laurel, borage, caraway, cardamom, chervil, chives, coriander, culantro, dill, ginger, horehound, lemon balm, lavender, marjoram, mexican tarragon, mint, parsley, oregano, rosemary, sesame, and thyme can be planted now.

Roses: Continue spray program. Water, water, water. May 15, apply liquid fertilizer. Cut and remove spent blooms. Check for spider mites.

Lawns: Check St. Augustine for chinch bugs. It is the beginning of mole cricket season for bahia, Bermuda, and zoysia lawns. The mole crickets have been busy laying eggs which will start hatching this month. Fertilize with 15-0-15 or 16-4-8 this month. Water restrictions (city water or wells) allow odd numbered houses to water Wed. & Saturday; even numbered houses – Thurs. & Sunday. Non-residential properties water on Tues. & Friday.

Trees: Some magnolias may drop their leaves during the spring months. This is normal, as they replenish foliage. Palms should have a "palm special" fertilizer applied over the root system under the spread of the fronds. The configuration should be 8-2-12-4 (N-P-K-Mg). Ideally this would also include manganese, boron, sulfur, etc. with appropriate formulations. Use a slow release fertilizer. If not using slow release, make monthly applications during the warmer months. Many palms are deficient in potassium, in spite of using palm fertilizers. Apply Muriate of Potash to correct this deficiency.

Vegetables: Scout for insects and hand remove if possible. Check the underside of leaves for eggs and aphids. Remember some insects are predators. These predators are important part of keeping the pests from totally taking over vegetables. Vegetables to plant this month are lima beans, eggplant, okra, Southern peas, and sweet potatoes.

Lima Beans

Selected from Florida Vegetable Guide by JM Stephens, RA Dunn, G Kidder, D Short, & GW Simone, University of Florida and Month-by-Month Gardening in Florida by Tom MacCubbin

June Checklist

Day Lily

Citrus: Depending on citrus fertilizer label, apply fertilizer every six weeks or as directed. Check for citrus insects; apply horticulture oil if insects are detected. Check for disease; apply appropriate fungicide. Weed as needed.

Fruit: Summer pruning to include water sprouts, and fire blight infected wood. Be sure to clean pruners between cuts using alcohol, bleach or Lysol on the blades to prevent transmitting diseases. Apply 6-6-6 or 8-8-8 fertilizer to pears and plums. Apply azalea fertilizer to blueberry shrubs at 1/2 lb per 3' of shrub. Weed as needed.

Flowers: If growth appears too slow and the foliage turns yellow, they may need fertilizer. Too much growth and a lack of flowers indicates the plants have all the nutrients they need and you canreduce nitrogen. Globe amaranth, melampodium, pentas, portulaca, purslane, salvia, zinnia, lantana, buddleia, daylily, verbena, purple coneflower, plumbago, and sun coleus can be planted in full sun. Plant agapanthus, blackberry lily, clivia, gloriosa lily, achimenes, crinum, and iris.

Herbs: Bay laurel, culantro, ginger, horehound, lavender, mexican tarragon, mint, parsley, oregano, rosemary, sesame, and thyme can be planted now.

Roses: Continue spray program. Apply liquid fertilizer. Cut and remove spent blooms. Check for spider mites. Water, water, water.

Lawns: Keep mower blades sharp (once a month is a good rule). Mow the lawn on the highest height for each species – never cut it too short.

Perennials: Some pests to check for are grasshoppers and katydids. Both may be chewing holes in plant leaves. Try to handpick them from the plants, or if needed, use a synthetic insecticide as instructed on the label for chewing insects.

Trees: Pests may be noticed in many trees. Their damage is minimal and sprays are seldom needed. Look for aphids, borers, mites, etc. If you missed the palm feeding last month, you can provide a slow-release fertilizer application. If you are on a monthly schedule, now is the time for a light fertilizer application.

Vegetables: June is not the best month to be starting a garden or planting new crops. Wait until August before putting in new plants. You may still plant tomatoes in containers if you want something to harvest. This is a good month to solarize your garden to fight against nematodes.

Tomato

Selected from Florida Vegetable Guide by JM Stephens, RA Dunn, G Kidder, D Short, & GW Simone, University of Florida and Month-by-Month Gardening in Florida by Tom MacCubbin

Nassau County is proud to provide you with this information. Horticulture News is a joint project with contributions by county agents and Master Gardener Volunteers.

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Should You Dethatch Your Lawn? *by Rebecca Jordi*

I get this question quite often and I am glad to have an opportunity to address it. The best information regarding thatch in Florida lawns comes from a University of Florida publication by Dr. Laurie Trenholm, Dr. J.B. Unruh, and Dr. John L. Cisar titled, "Thatch and Its Control in Florida Lawns." I have pieced together portions of the article which should answer some important questions about thatch.

Thatch is defined as an intermingled layer of dead and living shoots, stems, and roots that develop between the zone of green vegetation and the soil surface. Thatch consists of a loosely interwoven collection of plant matter that leaves the turf feeling spongy or puffy. Thatch removal should be considered necessary when thatch thickness exceeds one inch. Frequency of that removal will vary, depending on intensity of management.

For grasses north of Orlando, the best time for thatch removal is April through July. Vertical mowing at these times ensures quick recovery since warm-season grasses grow rapidly during these periods. After dethatching, cleanup is necessary. Thatch removed from an average sized lawn may fill several pick-up trucks.

While the above practice is common on highly managed turf, it is not always needed in home lawns. Homeowners are sometimes convinced buying this service will improve the condition of their lawns, and may spend unnecessary money on unneeded practices. Thatch is seldom a problem in younger lawns, but can sometimes become a problem in older lawns, particularly ones which have been over-fertilized and over-irrigated." To look at the entire article please check out the following website: ***http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/lh029***