Friday’s Feature
By
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Provide water for wildlife

Like humans, animals need water to survive. They use it for drinking, bathing and—in the case of fish and certain insects, reptiles, and amphibians—for reproduction. Water is an essential part of productive wildlife habitats. The University of Florida provides the following tips on how to help wildlife during dry periods or droughts.

Surface water sources such as puddles, raindrops on leaves, and dew on grass provide much of the water used by wildlife. Animals also get water from the foods they eat. But clean, fresh water that’s accessible to wildlife can often be hard to find—especially during a drought.

Birdbaths and small ponds are excellent ways to provide water for animals. And they can beautify the landscape, as well.

Birdbaths are the most popular way to provide water for wildlife. They can be homemade or commercial models. Birdbaths should be placed so that predators can’t sneak up on unsuspecting users. Keeping brush cover nearby offers protection and perches where birds can preen. Just be sure not to have low shrubbery too close—cats will use it for ambushes. In general, the lower the birdbath, the more open space there should be around it.

Birds prefer baths with textured bottoms for firm footing. You can cover smooth bottoms with pebbles or sand. Water in a birdbath should be no deeper than two to three inches in the middle, and the sides of the bath should slope gently so birds can easily climb in and out.

Birdbaths are available in materials as varied as concrete, terracotta, and plastic. Concrete models are expensive and cumbersome, but provide excellent footing for birds and will not budge in severe weather. A plastic birdbath may need to be secured against strong winds.

Keep the water in birdbaths clean and consistently available. Don’t use bleach or other chemicals to clean your birdbath—scrub it with a textured sponge every few days will remove algae.

Butterflies have special requirements for drinking. They take in liquids through their proboscis, a long,
hollow tube that is sort of a modified tongue.

These insects are often seen "puddling," or gathering at damp, sunny spots, where they draw moisture from mud or sand. Butterflies are incapable of drinking freestanding water, such as in a birdbath.

Several species of butterflies are attracted to free-standing puddles. They not only benefit from a drink but also utilize salts and breakdown products of decaying vegetation which is present in most puddles.

To keep your puddles from becoming a source of mosquitoes, bury a shallow potted plant saucer to its rim in an area receiving full sun in the butterfly garden. Fill the saucer with coarse pine bark or stones and fill to overflowing with water. The butterflies are able to drink from the cracks between the pine bark pieces or the stones while the mosquito larvae have a difficult time becoming established. Occasionally adding a small piece of over-ripe fruit, some stale beer, or a tablespoonful of composted cow manure or leaf compost to the puddle will provide the salts and amino acids that the butterflies need.

A garden pond can attract a variety of wildlife. One with aquatic plants as well as vegetation around its edges is ideal. Animals that might be attracted to your garden pond include turtles, frogs, birds, snakes, lizards, and raccoons.

You can create a pond with a rubber liner, pre-formed pond, or a large tub—materials readily found at most garden centers. There are many easy-to-grow water plants; make sure you choose ones that will thrive in the light conditions and size of your pond.

Make a small water hole in your yard for animals. You’ll be rewarded with fascinating sights and beautiful sounds, and you’ll help them survive dry times!

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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