**Weekly Express-News Article**

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**Wildscape – Thicket and Tangles**

The nature of your landscape is at least as important as bird feeding in attracting birds to your landscape.

The most attractive landscape to the widest selection of birds is one that offers thickets and tangles. The cover offers nesting sites during the breeding season. In the winter it offers protection from severe weather and predators. A landscape that has a diversity of plants, many of which that grow together to form thickets, also provides food for the wintering birds.

Insects operate and hide in the tangles for birds like wrens, warblers, and mockingbirds to feed upon. Most plants also provide some sort of seed or berry for birds to eat. Even if the seed was produced in the summer or fall remnants of the production remain in the cover for birds like cardinals, American sparrows, and, towhees to find.

Those of you that delight in a manicured landscape dominated by lawn grass will have less birdlife. You may want to compromise by dedicating back corners or thick hedges to encourage the birds. Any plantings that provide cover at least 6 feet deep is significant. A Burford holly hedge fronted by dwarf Chinese holly is disciplined and would meet the requirements of the 6 foot rule. It could even be hedged and still be attractive to birds.

A hedge of one of the tall viburnum fronted by a smaller viburnum such as “Sandankwa” would be in the same league.

In the case of the hollies the thorns make the thicket more attractive to the birds and the standard Burford holly is a good source of winter berries. The viburnum offer spring berries. Both suggested plantings are evergreen and both include often several vertical levels of plant growth, which is also important.

A landscape with a mix of tall trees, short trees, large shrubs, small shrubs, and groundcovers is the ideal mix to attract the largest selection of birds. It is especially desirable for the birds and your ability to observe them when the neighborhood has that diverse mix.

There are a number of excellent resources for helping you put together a bird-friendly landscape. One of my favorite books is “Attracting Birds to Southern Landscapes” by Thomas Pope, Neil Odenwald, and Charles Frying, Jr. The SAWS Landscape Care Guide is available for about $8 at Milbergers, Rainbow Gardens, Fanick Garden Center, and Antique Rose Emporium. It also has a wildscape section.

For a free pamphlet that includes a wildscape plan send a self addressed stamped 8 ½ by 11 inch envelope to Wildscape brochure c/o Calvin Finch, P. O. Box 2449, San Antonio, Texas 78298.

Here are a few more bird attracting plants and their desirable characteristics:

* Hackberry – attracts insects and produces huge crop of seeds in the summer and fall
* Anaqua – thick evergreen tree that produces berries in the summer
* Mexican Plum – small tree that has a thick crown and produces fruit in summer
* Firethorn – thorny small tree or large shrub that produces attractive red berries that are a favorite of wintering birds
* Yaupon Holly – small tree or large shrub that can be hedged. It has evergreen foliage and produces winter berries
* Turks Cap – two versions, one large and one small produce blooms for hummingbirds and fruit for other birds in the shade
* Butterfly Rose – Very large (8 ft by 12 ft) old fashioned rose that produces blooms 9 months of the year and thorny cover 12 months of the year
* Brasil – small evergreen native tree with thorns that provides summer berries
* Calamondin - attractive evergreen citrus that makes a good hedge and produces fruit for wintering birds
* Prostrate Lantana – hummingbird blooms and low growing cover. The native lavender version retains its blooms and foliage deep into mild winters
* Muhly Grass – ornamental grass that provides cover and winter seeds. The gulf muhly has pink seed heads

The landscape with good habitat includes both deciduous and evergreen plants. Evergreen plants provide more shelter from the weather and predators but deciduous plants are often good nesting sites and/or provide important blooms, berries, and nuts. To improve the cover value of deciduous plants do not be too anxious to rake the leaves in shrub boarders and wait until late February or March to cut down freeze killed stems and foliage.