

FREE TIME

## Wildlife in their backyard

### A Deltona couple spends 2 years to create an oasis of nature right outside their dining room.

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September 15, 2006

DELTONA -- Driving through Christy and Dennis Jefferson's Twin Lakes subdivision, it's clear that few if any of the large oaks and pines remain. The couple said that, as with many such neighborhoods, nearly all of the original vegetation was removed to make room for the tidy, middle-class homes set off from the street by large swaths of thirsty St. Augustine grass.

The front of the Jefferson house looks much like other homes in the neighborhood except for a colorful flower bed that is expanding slowly toward the street. It's not likely to get much bigger, though, because homeowner-association rules require a uniform look anchored by the ubiquitous manicured lawn.

But out back, it's a different story.

After two years of work, the couple has turned much of their lawn -- which they said provided little wildlife value -- into a colorful oasis that attracts butterflies, hummingbirds, snakes and birds of prey.

"There was no wildlife when we moved in -- St. Augustine has no value for wildlife," said Christy Jefferson, 60. "It might as well have been concrete."

Now, when the couple gaze out from their dining room, they can watch as butterflies hover over colorful blazes of native beautyberry, firebush and porterweed, and predators and prey stake out their respective places in the web of life.

"We keep binoculars by the dining area. It's fun to look out and see a hawk chasing a squirrel," Christy Jefferson said.

The Jeffersons are among a growing number of people in Florida who are taking the popular hobby of gardening and landscaping a step further by creating habitat for animals displaced by development, according to Ray Jarrett, an environmental specialist with the Florida Department of Agriculture and president of the Lyonia Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society.

"It's been a little bit of a craze in the last few years," he said. "In Florida, people are looking for plants that are less thirsty. St. Augustine is a beautiful grass, but it doesn't have a great deal of wildlife value."

Jarrett said individuals willing to landscape with native plants can have a significant effect on wildlife, especially where development has disrupted natural wildlife corridors.

"By putting in some native plants, you really fill in those voids," he said. "It makes a huge difference."

The Jeffersons say their garden, which measures about 35 by 80 feet, was designed specifically to attract wildlife. Using information from Web sites and other sources, they have created a habitat that, while not all native, provides all of the resources experts say are needed for wildlife.

Water drips from suspended containers into basins on the ground, and a mixture of flowering and berry-producing plants provide food. Man-made underground tunnels provide habitat for amphibians, and a pair of pines knocked down by the 2004 hurricanes lie where they fell, providing habitat for insects and amphibians, which in turn provide food for birds of prey.

"We kept the snags [fallen trees] because the birds love it," she said. "The bugs live in them and the birds eat the bugs and other stuff eats the birds -- it's the whole food-web thing."

The couple have been so successful that their yard has been recognized by the National Wildlife Federation as a Backyard Wildlife Habitat. A plaque recognizing the achievement is displayed in their garden.

The Jeffersons say that in addition to bringing hours of enjoyment, replacing the lawn with more drought-tolerant plants has helped them conserve water. More than half of all water used by households in the district goes to irrigating lawns, according to St. Johns River Water Management District spokesman Hank Largin.

Dennis Jefferson, 63, said that a smaller lawn also means less time spent mowing, something that leaves him more time to pursue other hobbies.

"If it was all grass, I'd be spending more time mowing," he said. "Now that it's established, it's virtually maintenance-free."

Maintenance and water-conservation issues aside, the couple said the greatest joy they get comes from knowing they are helping to protect animals that are struggling to adapt to a habitat that has been dramatically changed by humans.

"We love the wildlife," Christy Jefferson said. "It's like National Geographic in the backyard."

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The rich purple fruit of the native beautyberry bush is a favorite of butterflies in the Jeffersons' yard. (STEVEN BARNES, ORLANDO SENTINEL)

September 14, 2006





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When Dennis Jefferson gazes outside, he often can see butterflies, hummingbirds, snakes and birds of prey. He and his wife put in plants, water and food to create the atmosphere, designed to provide a habitat for animals displaced by development.

(STEVEN BARNES, ORLANDO SENTINEL)

September 14, 2006



The Jeffersons didn't use only native plants in their 35-by-80-foot yard, but they covered all the necessary resources. Man-made tunnels and trees felled by hurricanes help complete the award-winning yard. (STEVEN BARNES, ORLANDO SENTINEL)

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