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SEE THE LITTLE BIRDIES
Tips on attracting wildlife to your garden



PHOTO BY MARLIESE CARMONA
Last month, Rockledge Gardens opened the Harry and Mary Witte Center pavilion and gardens.

Rockledge Gardens expands with new education center

Become a gardening guru

MARIA SONNENBERG
FOR FLORIDA TODAY

Garden nurseries aren't just for plants anymore. With the opening last month of the Harry and Mary Witte Center pavilion and gardens, Rockledge Gardens has upped the ante on what to expect from a garden center.

"We want the center to be a place to educate people on how to be successful with their gardening projects. But just as important, we want this place to be a hub for the community," said Liz Lark-Riley, events and marketing director for Rockledge Gardens.

Named for Rockledge Gardens' founders, the new center will first and foremost be a hub for education.

"The Wittes especially prized knowledge and education," added Lark-Riley. Rockledge Gardens has an interesting history.

In 1948, bulb farmer Harry Witte settled in Brevard County with his wife, Mary. His business was essentially a roadside stand on U.S. 1 and run on the honor system, with a sign that said "grab a bag of soil and leave your money in the can."

From those modest beginnings, Witte eventually opened a traditional nursery in 1960. The Wittes' six children took turns working the business. Harry passed away in 1998 and Mary, now in her mid-90s, lives with youngest daughter Theresa and her husband, Kevin, who own and manage the large garden center that includes a hydroponic farm. They're joined in the day-to-day operations by daughter Aurelia, son-in-law Kris, son Joseph and daughter-in-law Liz.

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Theresa and Kevin are carrying on Theresa's parents' legacy with the new center, which was designed by Joseph, a theatrical set designer.

"We were in Taiwan for six months while Joseph was working for a theater company and Kevin did the building while we were gone," said Lark-Riley.

Rockledge Gardens has long hosted gardening classes, workshops, talks and special events on its four-acre property. The new center will allow the Gardens to expand offering to include everything from cooking to dance classes. The Rileys plan to rely on the place for their popular farm-to-table dinners, which resume in the fall.

The Gardens were already a popular backdrop for family and wedding photos; the new center raises the opportunity to enjoy the colorful nursery to the next level.

Because it is at the far end of the Gardens and secluded from the main

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INSIDE



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2

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BACKGROUND & BIRDS: GETTY IMAGES



PHOTO BY MARLIESE CARMONA

Rockledge Gardens is a popular spot for weddings, work retreats, birthday parties and more.

Garden

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garden center, the covered pavilion and its picturesque private are also available to rent for private events, such as weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, corporate meetings, retreats and fundraisers.

"The primary purpose was to have space for our classes, but the space is very versatile," said Lark-Riley. "We've already hosted several weddings there."

The pavilion is also the site for a quarterly Baby Clothing Swap, when parents bring outgrown baby clothes and pick up next-size outfits for their tiny ones at no cost. The next Swap takes place from noon to 4 p.m. Sunday, June 4.

"We encourage expectant moms to come by even if they don't have anything to trade, because we always have plenty of newborn clothing that we donate at the end of the event," said Lark-Riley.

This weekend should prove a perfect time to explore the Learning Center, for Rockledge Gardens is hosting its Third Annual Fairy Garden festival from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday, May 20, and from 11 a.m. until 3 p.m. on Sunday, May 21. Activities include fairy adventure garden make-and-take for kids and grown-ups, a scavenger hunt and a visit by Tinkerbelle.

Ultimately, however, visitors need no special reason to visit the Learning Center.

"We hope to see to see people come in to enjoy a picnic or just hang out with a good book," said Lark-Riley. "It warms my heart to see people wanting to be surrounded by the beautiful greenery."

The 8,000-square-foot Harry and Mary Witte Center includes a 2,000-square-foot pavilion, outdoor kitchen and bar and firepit. The pavilion can comfortably host 120 guests for a sit-down dinner and up to 200 for more casual events. Rental packages begin at \$300, depending on function and length of rental time.

There is no charge for individuals who may want to use the center as a spot to relax and reconnect with nature.

How to attract birds to your garden



Sally Scalera

GARDENING

An important principle of Florida-Friendly Landscaping is to attract wildlife. This is a popular hobby for many people since it is fun to go outside and enjoy the butterflies and birds. It is also very easy to attract wildlife by planting the correct plants that provide them food and shelter.

There is a long list of trees that can be planted to attract birds. Some of the trees are small like our native Fringetree (*Chionanthus virginicus*), which produces gorgeous white, fringed flowers in the spring before the foliage is produced. Another small native tree is Sweet acacia (*Vachellia farnesiana*), which is also a nitrogen-fixer. It is always great to have leguminous plants in the yard to supply some nitrogen to plants growing near them! Sweet acacia has small foliage that provides dappled shade for plants growing beneath and produces small, fragrant yellow pom-pom flowers throughout the year.

A large growing tree for attracting birds would be our native Hackberry (*Celtis laevigata*), which is also called sugarberry. Be sure to plant a hackberry away from the home, patio, deck, and driveway because they can cause a mess. The Asian woolly hackberry aphid creates honeydew, a clear sticky substance, that falls from the tree and coats whatever is below it such as cars, patio furniture, etc. Southern red cedar (*Juniperus silisicola*) is a native evergreen tree that will provide great nesting cover, plus female trees produce berries for the birds. It is very important to make sure that southern red cedar trees grow with a single trunk, or central leader, because the wood is weak. Multiple leaders will result in trunks being blown down during windy or stormy weather.

If you are considering the addition of a new tree or like the idea of attracting birds to your yard, here are some more trees to consider: Blackgum (*Nyssa sylvatica*), Cherry laurel (*Prunus caroliniana*), Chickasaw plum (*Prunus angustifolia*), Hollies (*Ilex* spp.), Elms

(*Ulmus* spp.), Geiger-tree (*Cordia sebestena*), Green cocoplum (*Chrysobalanus icaco*), Gumbo limbo (*Bursera simaruba*), Hercule's club (*Zanthoxylum clava-hercules*), Loquat (*Eriobotrya japonica*), Oaks (*Quercus* spp.), Marlberr (*Ardisia escallonioides*), May hawthorn (*Crataegus aestivalis*), Persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*), Pigeon plum (*Coccoloba diversifolia*), Hickories (*C. glabra*, *C. floridana*), Pond apple (*Annona glabra*), Pygmy fringetree (*Chionanthus pygmaeus*), Redbay (*Persea borbonia*), Red mulberry (*Morus rubra*), Satinleaf (*Chrysophyllum oliviforme*), Seagrape (*Coccoloba uvifera*), Simpson's stopper (*Myrcianthes fragrans*), Southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*), Sparkleberry (*Vaccinium arboreum*), Summer haw (*Crataegus flava*), Swamp bay (*Persea palustris*), Swamp dogwood (*Cornus foemina*), Sweetbay magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*), Wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*), White stopper (*Eugenia axillaries*), Wild lime (*Zanthoxylum fagara*), Wild olive (*Osmanthus americanus*), Winged elm (*Ulmus alata*) and Yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*).

These trees are native species except for the Loquat which does produce edible fruit, as does the native red mulberry. To find out more about their height and spread, do a search on the internet using the scientific name.

Birdfeeders can also be used to attract birds. You may have better success by using just one type of bird seed in the feeder, such as safflower seeds, which can result in less waste. Birds can be picky eaters and fling out the seeds they don't want. Also, be sure to hang the feeder close to a window so that you can see them easily. One more suggestion is that the sound of moving water from a fountain is another great

way to attract birds to your yard.

For those who would rather attract hummingbirds instead, the key is to plant several red, nectar-rich flowers in your yard. The closer they are planted to your house, the more likely you will be to see the hummingbirds when they visit. Many people believe that we don't have hummingbirds here, but we do, it is just hard to catch a glimpse of them when they do visit. They are both small and fast and they hear us before we even aware they are nearby. The minute they hear us, they split!

Trees that attract hummingbirds are the Red bottlebrush (*Callistemon citrinus*) and the Coral bean (*Erythrina herbacea*), which is also a nitrogen fixing plant like the sweet acacia. Right now, my coral bean tree is full of seed pods — proof that my tree has been visited by hummingbirds multiple times this spring. If you would like to add a larger tree that produces gorgeous bright orange tubular flowers to attract hummingbirds, the Geiger-tree (*Cordia sebestena*) would be perfect.

Planting a tree is a great way to add shade to your yard and attract birds. So, go outside and check out your yard. If it is sunny and hot, why not plant a new tree or two to bring a little shade and attract birds at the same time?

Sally Scalera is an urban horticulture agent and master gardener coordinator for the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agriculture Sciences.



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It's very easy to attract wildlife by planting the correct plants that provide them food and shelter.

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