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Gardening for the love of wildlife

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Al Diaz / Miami Herald Staff

Bill Shores walks past a Florida Joewood tree in his Miami garden.

This is one in a series of occasional reports about South Florida gardens.

Neat one-story houses with nice green lawns, a few shrubs under the windows and some palms shading the backyards. That's pretty much what you see when you drive through the Kings Grant East area in western Miami-Dade County.

That's until you arrive at the home of Bill Shores, a man who fell in love with the Florida Keys while visiting friends many years ago.

Because the Keys have undergone so much development and loss of wildlife habitat, he decided to turn his builder's half acre into a wildlife sanctuary. Here, nature's creatures are attracted by his native plants.

"I have plants in my blood and it's become my specialty to collect rare and endangered species that benefit wildlife," says Shores, who grew up on a farm in the Midwest.

Depending on the time of year, there might be robins, purple martins, painted buntings, cardinals, redstarts, hummingbirds, orioles, mockingbirds or even a hawk or two in his trees. He's seen possums, raccoons, lizards, of course, and even a turtle. Frogs lay their eggs in a water garden that's filled by rain running off the roof of his house.

And don't miss the butterflies — monarchs; julias; zebra longwings; atalas; black, giant and pipe vine swallowtails; admirals; sulphurs; cassius blues. The list goes on.

"I probably raise a couple of thousand butterflies a year," he says, assuring us that he's not exaggerating.

He bought his home just after Hurricane Andrew devastated this area near Country Walk. The house next door was gone and the one across the street had no roof. "And there were piles and piles and piles and piles and piles of garbage everywhere," he says.

The house he purchased had its storm damage repaired so it could be sold. But there weren't many trees or plants in the yard. "The hurricane had taken care of them," says Shores.

What was left outside was mostly grass, but Shores didn't even want that. So he tore it all out. "The neighbors thought I was crazy," he laughs.

He began his garden by planting native shrubs and small trees along the lot line.

"I wanted to create a natural fence of forest," he says. Although he wanted to hide his neighbors' fences, houses and cars, he didn't want to block the sun.

His plant choices included torchwoods that are native to coastal hammocks in the Keys. The trees get their name and distinct aroma from the resin they contain that also makes them burn quickly.

"It's unfortunate, but very few people have these," says Shores who hopes that someday they will attract the rare and endangered Schaus swallowtail butterfly that considers this tree a food source.

He also chose native wild olives because their tiny black fruits attract birds. "People also can eat some of these native fruits," he says.

He planted rare milk bark trees that get their name from their white bark that's reminiscent of a birch tree. He'd seen them growing in the Keys.

And he filled out the fence with plenty of wild coffee with its red berries, satinwood, spicewood, randia, wild lime, joewood, stoppers, maidenbush, cinnamon bark, big and little strong barks, limber capers with flowers that look like white fireworks and a native hibiscus with tiny red flowers that look like Chinese hats. "They like sun so they grow along the roadside in the Keys," he says.

His list of natives goes on and on, but we were particularly drawn to the aptly named rams horn. It usually grows as a bush but Shores' specimen has become a tree, with seed pods that curl like the horns of a ram.

With the living fence in place, the yard still has plenty of sun to accommodate palms, rare shrubs and native wild flowers.

To propagate his wildflowers, Shores waits for them to go to seed and then each time he walks by he drags his fingers along a stem. The seeds fall to the ground and many germinate naturally.

Shores points out the native petunia with purple flowers that come out to play in the morning. Bright yellow-orange cosmos cover the ground. And the gaillardias or Indian blanket sport a few red flowers whose petals are tipped with yellow. By summer these will carpet the yard. And he has so many pink and red salvias that he considers them weeds.

Of course, there's plenty of coontie too. A native nursery owner and friend told him to put the seeds on an ant mound. The ants eat away the bright orange flesh that covers the seeds, making them ready to plant.

He's also proud of his collection of palms, including sergeant palms and two non-native red leaf palms on which the new growth is bright red for a few days before turning green.

The last time he counted, Shores had 140 species of palms in his yard. He's particularly proud of his *Coccothrinax argentatas* or Florida silver palms. He has over 20 true natives that were not cross-pollinated with other *Coccothrinax* species.

"I just really love these palms. They are so delicate and dainty and each one has its own personality, whether it's a differently shaped frond or a variation in coloring," he says, pointing to the fans of this small palm that are dark blue green on top and silvery beneath.

One of his favorite specimens is over 100 years old, he believes. But these silver palms grow so slowly it's only about eight feet tall.

He bought it in Homestead from a nursery that was destroyed by Hurricane Andrew. "It had been salvaged from a palm farm way before that," he says. He cared so much for this particular specimen that he had his pool designed to go around it so it wouldn't be disturbed.

Shores has many stories of rescuing plants and trading seeds with naturalists, landscapers and friends to legally acquire his rare native collection.

For example, years ago he was given a very small piece of a native Keys tree cactus when poachers were caught with it. The government agents who handled the plant bust wanted to find that particular plant a good home, so they gave it to Shores.

In another instance, a nursery gave up trying to grow a man-in-the-ground. It gets its name from its underground root that stores nutrients and help this native survive drought and fire in the pinelands. Its pink tubular flowers are often the first things to be seen pushing through the char after a forest fire.

"It is a very rare and endangered species that could easily become extinct in Dade and other counties if we're not careful," Shores says.

He took it home and has been able to grow it enough to harvest two seed pods. He plans to donate the seedlings he grows from them to the visitors' center at Everglades National Park.

While most of his neighbor's yards still are covered with St. Augustine grass, some have tried to emulate him and he gladly shares plants.

However, he did leave just one small patch of St. Augustine in a back corner of his own yard.

"I keep it for old time's sake," he says.

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