

Is your yard a restaurant for bears?

While you enjoy your yard as a place to garden and relax in, it also may be an all-you-can-eat restaurant for bears.

The normal diet for Florida black bears is what they find in the woods or other natural areas, including acorns, berries, insects and the occasional small wild animal. Yet a bear may decide to visit your yard if it offers a menu of good things to eat.

Just look around your yard and imagine you are a bear seeking an easy meal. An overflowing garbage can, a big bowl of uneaten dog food or a generously filled bird feeder – all look and smell tasty to a bear. Remember the bear's nose is so sensitive it can smell something a mile away.

But this problem is fairly easy to fix. Indeed learning to be “bear wise” about what attracts bears to your yard is a key component of living without conflicts with bears in Florida.

The efforts that you take to make your yard less attractive to bears are important for the safety of pets, children and adults. Yet these same efforts also help conserve the lives of bears. Once you prevent bears from getting access to human sources of food, they are likely to stop coming into your neighborhood. That will help reduce human-bear conflicts. The bonus for you is those same steps also should keep foxes, coyotes, raccoons, rats and opossums from wandering into your yard in search of food as well.

So here are key “bear wise” tips to apply in your yard, whether you live in town or the country:

- Secure garbage in bear-resistant cans or in places such as a closed garage or sturdy shed. Wait until the morning of your garbage pickup day to bring trash cans to the curb.
- Feed pets indoors, or bring their outside food dishes in at night, even if they are empty. Store pet or livestock feed in bear-resistant containers.
- Remove bird and wildlife feeders. Ensure outdoors areas are free of all seed, corn and other wild animal feed.
- Keep gardens and orchards tidy. Harvest nuts, fruits and vegetables when they are ripe. Remove rotten fruit or vegetables.
- Clean barbecue grills and meat smokers after use with a degreasing detergent.
- Use electric fences to protect livestock, beehives, gardens and compost piles.

A critical conservation issue for Florida black bears is the increase in human-bear conflicts, which has been accelerated by the growing number of both bears and people in the state. There has been an increase in human-bear encounters and incidents of bears getting into garbage because people were not keeping their trash secure. In 2015, there were more than

6,000 calls to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) about bears, with 30 percent of the calls related to bears in garbage.

The FWC is working actively in partnership with homeowners, businesses, local governments and waste management companies to reduce bear attractants, providing technical assistance as well as incentive funding.

The FWC is also grateful to every homeowner, renter and visitor to Florida who decides to be “bear wise” and share their knowledge with a neighbor. You play a valuable role in helping people and bears coexist safely in this state.

Want to know more about Florida black bears, bear attractants, use of electric fencing and building bear-proof sheds? Go to MyFWC.com/Bears.



