

Feeding Squirrels

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A lot of people like to attract wildlife to their yard by planting certain plants, using feeders and even nesting boxes. When it comes to squirrels though, my suggestion is to add plants to your landscape that provide food and shelter for squirrels instead of using a feeder. There are actually a couple of reasons why it is better to use plants instead of feeders.

Squirrels make interesting wildlife neighbors and often can be attracted to your landscape with minimal effort. Attracting squirrels with feeders, however, is not recommended because it often causes more problems than benefits. . One of the major reasons that squirrels cause problems here in Florida is because people feed them using a bird feeder or a corn cob feeder designed specifically for squirrels. Feeders often encourage more squirrels to live in an area than can be supported by the neighboring habitat. When this occurs, squirrels may search out nesting sites in your home and cause property damage. Many squirrels that take up residence in an attic or garage ceiling can be traced to a feeding situation. Should the food ever be reduced or eliminated (you move, go on vacation, or you quit feeding them, etc.) the squirrels often respond by chewing up nearby vegetation. This can even result in the bark being stripped off of the tree either up in the branches or down at the base of the trunk. I have heard from people who have had a tree girdled by squirrels that resulted in the death of the tree. So, the potential problems from feeding squirrels is damage to your home, or a neighbors home, and possible damage to plants in your landscape.

Squirrels are basically vegetarians. They eat a wide variety of plants, but they mainly eat fruits and nuts. In the fall, they are especially attracted to oaks, hickories, sugarberry or hackberry and pecans. But, for all of their love of fruits and nuts, tree squirrels will also eat the eggs and young of nesting birds and certain types of insects. If you are interested in attracting some squirrels to your yard here are some native trees that you can plant that will also provide cover for them.

Red maples (*Acer rubrum*) are a large growing shade tree that can grow 60-75 feet tall with a 25-35 foot spread. It is an excellent deciduous tree that prefers moist, acidic soil and it is also very cold tolerant. The seeds are eaten by squirrels.

Tough bumelia (*Bumelia tenax*) is an evergreen tree that grows 15-30 feet tall with a 10-20 foot spread. Plant this tree in full sun only and for those of you who live on the beach this tree has a high salt spray tolerance. It produces showy fruit that attracts birds and squirrels and it has good drought and cold tolerance.

The pignut hickory (*Carya glabra*) grows 50-65 feet tall and has a spread of 30-40 feet. It can take full sun to partial shade and is a deciduous tree. It is very cold and drought tolerant.

Hackberry, also called sugarberry, (*Celtis laevigata*) is a large growing tree to about 50-70 feet. The spread can reach 50-60 feet and it can take full sun to partial shade. This tree also has a high salt spray tolerance and it is very drought tolerant but can also tolerate extended flooding.

Our native fringe tree (*Chionanthus virginicus*) is a small growing tree that only gets to about 12-20 feet tall with a 10-15 foot spread. This tree produces white flowers in the spring before the leaves emerge and the fruits it produces are eaten by both birds and squirrels. It is also extremely cold hardy.

Another small growing, spring flowering tree is the Chickasaw plum (*Prunus angustifolia*.) It grows to 12-20 feet with a 15-20 foot spread. It likes full sun to partial shade and also has a high drought tolerance. The flowers are also fragrant.

If you are interested in attracting squirrels, you may want to consider adding a new tree to your yard instead of using a feeder. By adding plants that also provide cover you can eliminate any problems that could arise from an unnaturally large squirrel population.