

Gardening for Birds

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Throughout the world, overpopulation and unchecked development has led to habitat destruction and forest fragmentation. In our own region, the ever-growing suburban developments have not only destroyed natural forests, but have created environments that are no longer friendly towards many kinds of wildlife, including birds. Ornithologists worldwide are constantly studying the effects of these habitat changes on birds' migratory and reproductive patterns. They suspect that fragmentation harms many woodland birds by increasing their susceptibility to predation by animals such as blue jays, crows, and raccoons. When a forest is fragmented, predators gain more access to the woodland.

Because birds are a mobile group of animals, they seek out habitats where it will be safe to build nests as well as provide food for themselves and their offspring. Gardeners around the world agree birds are as natural to gardens as plants. Many know of things to attract birds to their yards, including a water source, bird feeders, and bird houses. It is important to remember, however, that a major source of bird shelters, food sources, and nesting areas are plants. By making a conscious effort to include specific plants in your garden to help birds, you can play a part in sustaining bird populations.

Plants and birds have evolved together. Seeds of many plants become scarified by passing through birds' digestive systems. Most trees and shrubs have fruits that are 3/5 inches in diameter, which is the size of a bird's gape. Many trees and shrubs ripen during times of bird migration when birds need nourishment the most. These fruits have nutrients that never serve the plant, but rather provide sustenance for birds that help to disperse the seed. It is also good to remember that native plants have evolved with native birds. Using native plants in your garden will ensure proper nourishment for native birds during times of migration. Some berries from exotic plants have been shown to change the plumage colors of birds which may disrupt proper reproduction patterns.

The fruit of *Amelanchier canadensis*, or serviceberry, attracts over 25 species of birds. The Scarlet Tanager, Kingbird, and Brown Thrasher are among the bird species that feast on the fruit of this small tree. Serviceberry is easy to find in most nurseries and is best if planted in early spring in well-drained, moist soil. Additionally, the Kingbirds, American Robin, and Wood Thrush use this plant for nesting.

A real hit with over 100 bird species, *Cornus florida*, flowering dogwood, produces fruit from August to November with a high lipid content which makes it perfect food for birds migrating in the fall. Its fruit is a preferred food for interesting birds like the Hermit Thrush, Eastern Bluebird, and the Evening Grosbeak. While the *Cornus kousa*, the Kousa dogwood, is a favorite plant for many gardeners because of its resistance to dogwood anthracnose and the multitude of cultivars available, the fruits are sometimes too big for native birds to swallow.

A garden favorite for its bright berries during winter, *Ilex verticillata*, winterberry, is also a favorite of at least 12 bird species. Northern Mockingbird, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, and Hermit Thrush eat the fruit of this deciduous shrub. The Cedar Waxwing and Red-Winged Blackbird use it for a nesting place as well. Many different hollies provide shelter and food to birds year-round. *Ilex laevigata* (smooth winterberry), *Ilex*

glabra (inkberry), *Ilex opaca* (American holly) are all excellent hollies for beautifying a garden as well as attracting birds.

Pinus strobus, the white pine, can grow to be 100 feet in the forest. This tree provides excellent protection for birds year-round. Additionally, dozens of species eat the seeds and nest in this tree's branches. Wild Turkey, White-Breasted Nuthatch, and Red Crossbill consume the seeds and older trees are used for cavity nesting by many other species.

Many gardeners design entire beds just to welcome the migrating hummingbird. In North America, there are 18 species of hummingbirds but the only species that breeds in eastern North America is the Ruby-Throated Hummingbird. Many of the plants that attract hummingbirds will also add to the perennial border beautifully. Plants with tubular shaped flowers that are brightly colored will attract hummingbirds. *Dicentra eximia*, the fringed bleeding heart, grows to about a foot tall in non-spreading clumps. It is grown for its beautiful fuchsia-red flowers that open in May. *Agastache cana*, hummingbird's mint, is a native to Texas but is hardy in our area. This plant is drought-tolerant and grows to 2 to 6 feet tall. Its flowers are coppery red-orange and a tasty treat for hummingbirds from late summer to fall. *Aquilegia canadensis* grows naturally on the forest edge. Its red flowers with yellow centers bloom in early summer in part-to-full sun. There are many cultivated varieties of this plant, but the red- and orange-flowered types are the most attractive to hummingbirds. The cinnamon fern, *Osmunda cinnamomea*, is not grown for its flower, but rather the fuzz on the base of the fern's fronds that hummingbirds use to line their nests.

Spring is the perfect time to start planting your garden to begin attracting birds. As with so many things in the world of horticulture, a bigger impact can be made when a community of people comes together. Encourage your neighbors to plant gardens that will attract birds as well because an isolated habitat in the midst of suburban lawns will face more challenges in making an impact on bird populations.

Readying your garden for birds, you will become a part of the effort to save declining bird populations in this part of the country. You can help professional biologists even more by counting and tracking bird populations in key areas during specific times of the year. Your own backyard can serve as a place of observation in the annual Great Backyard Bird Count program (<http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/>) that is led by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society. Counts like these help to educate the public about bird species diversity in specific locations and help to make people aware of the importance of ensuring that birds are properly represented in their communities.

Online Resources:

Birdsource- participate in nationwide bird counts
<http://www.birdsource.org/>

Pennsylvania chapter of the Audubon Society
<http://pa.audubon.org/>

Audubon at Home Program
http://www.audubon.org/bird/at_home/index.html

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