



## ATTRACTING BIRDS TO LANDSCAPES

Birds add interest, movement, color and even beautiful sounds to our gardens. Many bird species feed on insects, and this can help hold down populations of pests that may damage plants in landscapes or gardens.

Because of this, gardeners often put out bird food of various types in feeders to attract birds to the landscape. Gardeners can even go so far as to design and plant landscapes that are particularly attractive to birds. Some people are motivated to do this by the increasing of the loss of natural habitat facing many bird species.

So, what can we do to encourage birds to live in our landscapes? The primary features the environment must provide to invite birds into the landscape include shelter, nesting sites, water and food.

Although people often provide food and water for birds, shelter and nesting sites should not be overlooked. Difficulty in finding natural shelter near the food and water sources you supply may tempt birds to look elsewhere for a more promising environment. If you can provide a place for birds to nest, you'll have the pleasure of seeing them frequently at close range and the advantage of allies in the control of insects.

A number of birds will nest in trees and large shrubs in the landscape, though each species shows a strong preference for the specific elevation at which it feeds and nests. This is apparent in natural forests where some birds sing and feed in the high canopy level but nest in the lower canopy. Others may feed on the ground, nest in shrubs and sing from the highest trees. These bird movements demonstrate that a multilevel planting design is important.

Adding levels to a plant community increases surface area by creating more leaves, stems, nooks, and crannies on which birds can nest, feed, and sing. The use of various size shrubs and small as well as larger trees planted in masses or groups will achieve this in a landscape design.

Shelter for nesting may also be provided with birdhouses or bird boxes. These human-made structures, if properly done to specific dimensions and located in the right spot, can provide nesting sites for birds that would rarely find suitable sites in urban areas. Birds that nest in the cavities of dead trees, for instance, will find few sites available since dead trees are quickly removed from urban landscapes. Bird houses would be utilized by birds such as the purple martin, house finch, woodpeckers, robin and Eastern bluebird to name a few.

If birds ignore the houses you've installed for them, make sure you have done everything correctly on the dimensions and location of the house – and then be patient. Decorative bird houses meant more for show than to provide a home for birds will rarely be utilized.

Even done properly a brand-new house may be viewed at first with suspicion. Once it's weathered a bit, birds are more likely to accept it. Fall would be a good time to put up bird houses since they would have some time to weather before the birds start to use them next spring.

Include plants in your landscape that produce fruit that birds will eat such as native hollies, cherry laurel and hawthorns (*Crataegus* species) wherever possible. However, putting out bird feeders is another option becoming increasingly popular as a means of attracting birds into the landscape. When setting up a feeding station, be sure you are willing to make a commitment to maintain a dependable food supply and to keep the health and safety of the birds in mind.

Seeds may be purchased by individual varieties or in mixed form. What and how you buy will depend on a number of factors, such as your bird-feeding goals, feed costs and availability. Some of the seeds commonly found in inexpensive commercial mixes, such as wheat, milo, peanut hearts, hulled oats and rice are relatively unattractive to many birds. You will generally attract more birds with preferred seeds.

This does not mean that unattractive seeds won't be eaten, but preferred seeds will be eaten first and tend to attract birds that might not otherwise visit a feeder. Thistle seeds, hulled sunflower seeds, small black oil-type sunflower seeds, white proso millet and finely cracked corn are very useful for attracting particular species.

Ruby throated hummingbirds are found all around southeast Louisiana in spring, summer and fall (sometimes during winter). Attracting hummingbirds can be as easy as hanging a feeder, but because many hummingbirds are not accustomed to using feeders, that is not always successful. Many gardeners have found that planting a garden full of hummingbird attracting plants, in addition to maintaining feeders, is a good method for successfully attracting hummers.

Place feeders high enough so that domestic cats cannot attack the birds while they are feeding, and place them so they can be clearly seen from windows for maximum viewing pleasure (this advice really applies to all types of bird feeders). Hummingbird feeders are most effective when located within view of flowers that attract hummingbirds.

Water is not food, but it can make a feeding station more attractive. By providing water (which birds use for both drinking and bathing) you may encourage birds to stay in your yard. Several commercial watering trays are available, but you can use almost any shallow container so they can drink and/or bathe. Make sure you regularly add fresh water to the bird bath and clean it as needed.

It is true that birds are often included on lists of common garden pests. Vegetable and fruit gardeners, in particular, are often frustrated by birds eating newly planted seeds or pecking at or

feeding on fruit or vegetables they are growing. Despite these occasional problems, the presence of birds is almost universally welcome among gardeners.

This is just a taste of the information available on gardening with birds in mind.

For more information, two excellent books to read are:

**Attracting Birds to Southern Gardens** by Thomas Pope, Neil Odenwald and Charles Fryling, Jr.

**Hummingbird Gardens** by Nancy Newfield and Barbara Nielsen.

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