

Birdscaping to Feed and Shelter Birds

Many of us put out a variety of feeders to lure different bird species to visit. Although feeders allow us to view birds up close, creating bird-friendly plantings let you observe and enjoy birds in a more natural habitat. If you can dedicate a portion of your schoolyard or other available area to create an inviting place birds, you'll be rewarded with the immeasurable pleasures of watching the fascinating habits, antics, and acrobatics of the avian wildlife that will surely be drawn to your plantings.



Add to that the fact that habitat loss is now considered one of the leading causes of the decline of certain bird species. You can help reverse this trend by planting a variety of native species that will help native birds thrive.

How do you decide what to plant? Choose species that provide food and shelter.

Planting for Food

Some bird species stick around all year long, while others migrate to more favorable climates for certain periods of the year. By ensuring there's always something yummy and nutritious for them to eat growing in your landscape, you'll help year-round denizens, birds that have returned from their migration, and those that are stopping to fuel up as they pass through on their way north or south.

Woody Plants

The following plants produce fruits that mature in late summer or fall and persist on the plants into winter — in other words, the fruits don't drop to the ground. However, hungry birds and other wildlife might gobble them up before winter sets in!

American Cranberrybush Viburnum (*Viburnum trilobum*, zones 2 to 7). A large shrub growing 8-10' tall and wide, this plant produces abundant red berries in summer that persist on the plant through winter, making it both beautiful and a boon to hungry birds. Other fruit-bearing viburnums include *V. lentago* (nannyberry) and *V. prunifolium* (blackhaw).

Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*, zones 5 to 8). This adaptable shrub grows up to 3 to 6' tall and wide. In fall, it produces stunning violet to magenta, berry-like clusters of fruits that encircle the twigs at regular intervals.

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Crabapples (*Malus*, zones 4-8). Though not native to North America, crabapples have been planted or self-sown across much of the U.S. The spring flowers are spectacular, and the small, hard fruits are especially attractive to birds after a few freeze/thaw cycles.

Flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*, zones 5-9). A small, deciduous tree growing 15' to 30' tall, it produces beautiful spring flowers followed in late summer by small, bright red fruits that are inedible to humans but loved by birds. Avoid planting in areas

where the disease dogwood anthracnose is known to be a problem. Other fruit-producing *Cornus* species include *C. sericea* and *C. alba*.

American bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*, zones 3-8). This 15-20' vine produces berries that mature in fall and persist on the plant through winter. When growing bittersweet for the attractive berries, you'll need a male plant for every five female plants for pollination. The plants' flowers are small and inconspicuous; the real show begins in late summer, when the berries' outer casing turns orange to red, then splits open to reveal the bright red, berry-like fruit inside. Growing these large vines requires plenty of space and a very sturdy support structure or fence.

Note: The plant is similar to the highly invasive Oriental Bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*). Know your plant source to be sure you're getting the native species!

Other good choices include winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*, zones 3 to 9) and other hollies, elderberry (*Sambucus* species, Zones 3 to 9), and Oregon grape (*Mahonia* spp., zones 5 to 11).

Perennials

Stop deadheading these perennials in midsummer to allow the last wave of flowers to develop into seedheads filled with nutrient-rich seeds. Goldfinches, chickadees and other birds will thank you.

Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia* species, zones 3 to 9). Gardeners and birds alike love this flower garden staple. Many types sport the traditional shape and palette — strappy yellow petals surrounding a deep brown central disk — though plant breeders have developed many variations on this theme.



Purple coneflower (*Echinacea* species, zones 3 to 10, depending on variety). There are numerous native species, as well as dozens of cultivated varieties in a range of bloom colors. Plant heights vary widely, so choose varieties carefully.

Joe Pye Weed (*Eupatorium purpureum*, zones 4 to 9). This tall, stately plant produces large clusters of dusky pink blooms in late summer, followed by abundant seed. Prefers moist soil.

Sedum (*Sedum* species, zones 3 to 10, depending on variety). As summer bloomers begin

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to fade, sedum begins its show, with mounds of tiny flowers that provide a much-needed supply of nectar for pollinators, followed by nutritious seeds for birds.

Other good perennials include **liatris** (also known as gayfeather), **coreopsis**, and **creeping wintergreen** (*Gaultheria procumbens*). Include some annuals, too, like **sunflowers**, **millet**, **cosmos**, and **tithonia**.

Early Spring

As winter begins to fade and landscapes come to life, many songbirds turn to a diet rich with insects. Add early-rising and early-blooming plants to your landscape to attract insects — and then tolerate some plant damage from the insects so birds get a chance to dine. If you have the space, consider planting a wildflower meadow that contains a mix of native species.

Planting for Shelter

Birds need protection from harsh weather, as well as places to hide from predators. Fill your landscape with plants in varying characteristics — tree and shrubs for height, evergreens for winter cover, grasses for ground-dwelling birds.

- A brush pile in the corner of your lot may look a bit untidy to your human neighbors, but it's an inviting place for birds to find shelter. Top it off with evergreen limbs to help shed water.
- If it's safe to do so, leave dead limbs, and even whole trees, for cavity-nesting birds, and for birds that eat insects tunneling under bark.
- Leave some grasses to grow tall and form seedheads. As they bend under the weight of frost or snow, they create perfect hiding places for birds to rest.
- Thorny plants, firethorn and wild roses, provide excellent protection from predators.
- Create lots of “edge” habitats. That's where lawn meets shrubs, or flower gardens meet woods. These are rich areas of habitat for feeding, shelter, and nesting.

Finally, be sure to have a year-round source of fresh water for visiting birds. In cold climates, a birdbath heater is one option for ensure a supply of thawed water.

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