

Hooked on Hummingbirds

Overview: Introduce your young gardeners to these magnificent creatures and discover ways to attract hummingbirds to your garden.

Materials:

- Internet access or a hummingbird field guide
- A space full of flowering plants attractive to hummingbirds (a home garden, community garden, botanical garden, park, or greenspace)
- plants to attract hummingbirds (optional)
- hummingbird feeder (optional)



Approximate Time to Complete: 1+ hours

Location: Outdoor

Ages: All ages

Season: Spring through fall

Instructions

Their spectacular beauty, fearless nature, and astonishing powers of flight captivate our attention and make hummingbirds among the most beloved of all birds. Who wouldn't be awed by a creature weighing a mere six grams that, fueled by flower nectar and insects, can manage to fly nonstop for 600 miles?

These tiny creatures, about the size of an adult's thumb, can travel thousands of miles a year, using nectar, insects, and safe spots to rest and refuel along the way. Ruby-throated hummers, which breed in the eastern United States and are found in most states, have winter homes between southern Mexico and northern Panama, and they begin their journey there as early as mid-July. The peak of fall migration for the ruby-throats is late August through early September which makes early fall a great time to begin to keep your eye out for them. You can use the [Journey North website](#) to use citizen science participation to track their migration.

1. Introduce young gardeners to these amazing animals. Dive into library books and hummingbird enthusiast websites. There are many available because hummingbirds are well loved. You may want to start by exploring [Audubon's Guide to North American Birds](#). Another resource is "[Hummingbirds: Magic in the Air](#)", an hour-long documentary from the PBS program *Nature*.

2. Once you have your young gardeners hooked on hummingbirds, begin your search efforts to see them in action. Hummingbirds are attracted to flowers in shades of red, orange, and purple — especially nectar-rich flowers that are shaped like tubes. Some of their favorite plants to visit

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include: trumpet creeper, bee balm, cardinal flower, red columbine, Indian pink, penstemon, spotted jewelweed, lupine, salvia, impatiens, petunia, shrimp plant, morning glory, butterfly bush, hollyhock, and azaleas. Search for areas in your garden or at local greenspaces that offer some of these blooms and plan time for a hummingbird stakeout. Hummingbirds are attracted to many of the same flowers as butterflies so a local butterfly garden might be a great place to start. Just like many animals, they are most active in early morning and late afternoon/early evening, so these may be the best times to spot them, but they can be found throughout the day.

3. Alternatively, you can also set up a hummingbird feeder using sugar water as a nectar substitute. If you choose to go this route, please note that this will take some effort because the 'nectar' you make will need to be changed and your feeder cleaned regularly. You can find pre-made feeders to purchase at a very reasonable cost and there are many homemade designs you can try using recycled plastic bottles. Here are some hummingbird feeder tips:

- Use feeders designed to exclude wasps, bees, and ants.
- To make nectar, use one part sugar to four parts water. Use ordinary granulated white table sugar. Do not use honey, artificial sweeteners, flavorings, or anything but 20 percent sugar water! Do not add food coloring to nectar.
- Boil the sugar-water mixture for up to two minutes to allow the sugar to dissolve. This will also slow the rate of spoilage. Cool the nectar before adding it to the feeder.
- Store unused nectar in the refrigerator for up to two weeks. To avoid waste and cue you to clean and refill the feeder, only put out a small amount of nectar at a time.
- Always keep feeders clean and nectar fresh! When temperatures are over 60 F, it is best to clean feeders every two days. To clean, rinse the feeder with hot water. If you see fungus growing inside (usually black spots), use a bottle brush or pipe cleaner to remove all trace of the fungus. You can also try adding sand and water to the bottle and shaking vigorously to remove fungus. It is usually not necessary to use soaps or cleaners. If you do, be sure to rinse thoroughly.

4. Did your family get hooked on hummingbirds? Plan your hummingbird habitat garden. In addition to the plants listed in step 2 above, remember they will also need trees to build their nests, areas of sunshine and shade, and access to water. Check out Audubon's [How to Create a Hummingbird-Friendly Yard](#) for additional ideas.

Hummingbirds are also attracted to blooming plants in our edible gardens, including crabapples, and currants, as well as herbs like sage and rosemary. Learn more about [Food Forests](#) and how they feed humans and wildlife alike.

**Hummingbird photo by Austin Ogolsky*

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