



Bringing Birds to Your Backyard

Open up your garden to birds. Birds eat tons of insects, improve property values, and provide entertainment and stress relief. Each year, birds face increasing challenges as more land is developed and paved over. Birds do need our help.

To attract the widest variety of birds, offer several birdfeeders with different foods. Remember to keep the feeders clean. Moldy and spoiled seed has led to severe disease outbreaks. Be careful when buying birdseed. Some brands contain inexpensive filler seeds, such as red millet, golden millet, buckwheat, rice, milo, rape seed, cracked corn, oats, canary seed, and flax seeds that most birds just won't eat. The seed is wasted

The best food for attracting the largest variety of birds is sunflower seed. Black oil sunflower seeds have thin shells which are easy for birds to crack open and have a high fat content that is very beneficial, especially in winter. Striped sunflower seeds have thicker shells and are harder for some smaller birds to crack open. Shelled sunflower seeds avoid the problem of seed shell clean up, but are expensive and can spoil quickly. Put out no more than one or two days' worth of the shelled seed. Safflower seed is thick-shelled and is enjoyed by cardinals, grosbeaks, doves, native sparrows, and chickadees. Corn and peanuts are also enjoyed by a variety of birds, but can spoil quickly, especially if wet. Fungi that may grow on corn and peanut seed produce aflatoxins, liver poisons that are fatal to birds. Suet feeders provide nourishment for the insect eaters during the winter, but also in spring and early summer when insect numbers are low.

Hummingbird feeders can be filled with a home-made solution. Add 1 cup sugar to 4 cups of boiling water. Cool. Do not use artificial sugars, because zero nourishment is provided. Be diligent about cleaning the feeder at least weekly to prevent disease. Red color on the feeders is very attractive to the hummingbirds; it is not recommended to color the feeding solution.

Trees and shrubs can provide food, shelter, and areas for nesting. Native plants will attract insects that our American birds feed upon. Dogwoods, such as the Pagoda dogwood, attract more than 90 species of birds. Sumac berries are eaten by over 95 species of birds. Consider planting annual and perennial sunflowers, goldenrods, big and little bluestem grass, Juneberries, wild grapes, viburnums, hawthorns, wild and choke cherry, elderberry, aronia, and raspberries. Evergreens provide year-round shelter. Wait until spring to deadhead your coneflowers, asters, and other flowers; the seeds provide winter food for many birds. Many of our ornamental crabapples have fruit that stays on the trees late into winter; one of winter's most awesome sights is to see a herd of thirty wild turkeys up in your crabapple tree, enjoying a late winter feast of small fruit.

Even birds that don't eat seeds will be attracted to a bird bath for drinking, as well as for bathing. Place the bath in a shady, cool location if possible, with trees or shrubs nearby. Change the water daily. To prevent disease, clean the bird bath weekly and also as needed. The bath should be no deeper than ½ to 1 inch at the edge, sloping to a maximum of 2 inches deep. Add a small amount of stone, gravel, or clean sand, especially if the sides of the bath are glazed or slippery. If you can install a pump to keep the water moving, the sound of dripping water will attract many birds. You can punch a tiny hole in a large container, hang it over the bird bath, and let water drip out slowly.

Bird houses are a fun project to share with a grandchild or neighborhood kid. Different size holes and boxes will attract different bird varieties. Check to see that the bird house has enough ventilation. One side should be hinged, so that you can thoroughly clean out the inside each year. Reinforce the opening with a baffle or ring to prevent squirrels, raccoons, and other predators from disturbing the nest. Short pegs or perches are not recommended, because they provide access for unwanted birds and predators. Place the bird house away from the commotion of the bird feeders.

Nesting material includes small sticks, leaves, straw, dry grass, 4-8 inch lengths of yarn or string, short lengths of human or animal hair, feathers, wool, and thin strips of cloth. Place the nesting material into a mesh bag and hang it on a tree.

Cornell University (<http://www.birds.cornell.edu>) has an excellent, informative bird web site. And if you make your yard really bird friendly, you can certify it as a Backyard Wildlife Habitat with the National Wildlife Federation (<http://www.nwf.org>). Good luck attracting birds. May the local Audubon Society (<http://www.saintpaulaudubon.org>) flock to your yard.