

Gardening is for the Birds – Planning a Bird-friendly Garden

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With warmer days now being sprinkled into the forecast it's time to ramp up garden preparation and planning. We all enjoy dreaming about a big vegetable harvest and new flower varieties to try for our enjoyment and nutrition, but wait, what if we take a moment to think about who, or in this case *what* else benefits from our gardens and yards? Birds and bees are essential for pollination and helpful for chemical free pest management in our landscapes. Let's explore easy and low-cost ways to encourage these helpful garden friends to join our gardening efforts.

Habitat and cover

According to summerwindsnursery.com, as more natural habitats become threatened by development, attracting birds to our yards provides a critical oasis for both local birds and migrating species. By developing an attractive habitat around our homes, we will increase the opportunity for many bird varieties to live and thrive. Chirpforbirds.com notes that thick, overgrown shrubs and dead tree branches are ideal nest spots for many insect-eating birds. You can also hang birdhouses and nesting boxes on the fence rail or posts. Even in a tiny yard, the garden will greatly benefit with a "messy" area perfect for these feathered friends.

Planting for success with Native plants and water sources

According to the National Wildlife Federation, Black Oil sunflower seed is always a good choice if you use a feeder, with less wasted seed falling to the ground, since many bird varieties like to eat it. Bird feeders must be cleaned occasionally to keep the visiting birds safe from transmitting viruses. As we enjoy watching birds at the feeder it is important to remember, the best bird food comes from nature in the form of native plants which provide seeds, nuts, berries, and nectar that most species need to survive. When you are deciding which native flowers, shrubs and trees to plant remember the birds and bees will make your yard a popular stopover if your garden plants provide the food they crave.

A birdseed garden should be in a sunny location and with as much plant diversity as possible. Choose plants with different bloom and seeding times, and plant in succession to extend the growing season and feed birds as long as possible. Opt for organic fertilizers to nourish plants in a birdseed garden, such as compost or seasonal manure. A thick layer of mulch will help regulate the root temperature of the plants. National Geographic Society recommends Sunflowers, Coneflower, Black-eyed Susan, Daisy, Aster, Marigold, and Virginia Creeper as they all have good seed production. You can plan ahead for next year's flowers by harvesting some of the seeds from these flowers to sow in the fall or spring. Some varieties of flowers such as Coneflowers will save you work by self-seeding for the following season.

Most backyard birds eat a combination of seeds, berries, and insects. Gardensupply.com lists several varieties of birds and their preferred protein. For example, many songbirds target aphids, whitefly and scale, Bluebirds favor grasshoppers (a real issue in West Texas gardens), crickets, beetles, larvae, and moths and Cardinals (a personal favorite) target beetles, grasshoppers, leafhoppers, stinkbugs, and snails. Making a home for birds at your home makes good gardening sense and is a boost to the overall balance between cultivating crops and living with nature.

Plan to plant cultivars with similar water needs next to each other when possible, to conserve your watering work and to ensure watering consistency for the health of the plant. Birds need fresh water year-round so if you have room, provide a bird bath or other water feature, such as a fountain or a pond.

I enjoy watching hummingbirds during the summer and there are many lovely vines, flowers, and flowering trees which attract hummingbirds. Penstemon (a great drought tolerant plant), Honeysuckle, Butterfly bush, Columbine, Coral Bells, Trumpet Vine, and Rose of Sharon are just a few of the hummingbird favorites.

As the birds will not distinguish between “your” food and “their” food in the garden, it will help with frustration if you also plan to protect some of your vegetables and fruits as they ripen, with a guard such as bird netting. You may consider planting enough to allow for the birds to help themselves. I hope you will consider planning and planting your landscape with our backyard gardening buddies, the birds, in mind.

We will have the BCMGA Saturday Seminar from 9:00-12:00 on March 25th at the Taylor County Extension Office Conference Room, and the topic is Gardening in West Texas. If you have any questions, call the Taylor County Extension Office at 325-672-6048 or email us at mgardeners@yahoo.com.