



*Congratulations! By deciding to enhance your property for wildlife, you are on the way to providing beauty for your home, creating excitement for your family, and affecting the future survival of wildlife in your area.*

*No matter what the size of your property or budget, you CAN make a difference.*

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## Landscaping For Birds

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Few people would deny that there is pleasure in having birds in the garden. Their activity interests us, their colors enchant us, and their songs brighten the day. Add the fact that they eat lots and lots of insects, and in some cases pollinate our flowers. It's no wonder that feeding and watching birds is a major national pastime.

More and more, however, you hear people sadly saying that "there just aren't as many birds as there used to be." In some ways this is true: development, pesticides, indiscriminate cutting of forests, unchecked predators, disruption of migration paths – all of these have cut down considerably on the numbers of some bird species.

With greater awareness and environmental protection, some are making a comeback, and for this we can be grateful.

At the same time, we can each play a part in recreating desirable habitat for birds, and they will reward us by visiting our yards in greater variety and numbers.

### Plants

The tendency today when building houses is to clear-cut the lot, construct the house, add a few small foundation plantings, and then surround it with a vast expanse of green lawn. Grass has its place but, with the exception of robins, flickers, and starlings, it is of no benefit to birds, nor to most other wildlife for that matter.

Flower gardens are lovely and add back some food and cover, but not nearly enough to sustain large populations of birds.

When landscaping for birds, you need to think about the four essential needs of wildlife: food, water, shelter, and space.

By carefully choosing a variety of trees, shrubs, and other plants, then adding additional food and water as needed, you can create a habitat that will bring you endless enjoyment through every season.

**Birds come in a wide variety, so it is only natural that they have a large range of preferences as far as food, nesting sites, and shelter.**

If all species enjoyed the same plants, there would be overcrowding and too great a drain on limited resources. Therefore, when you are choosing plants, strive for diversity to ensure the greatest assortment of species in your yard.

You will want to consider trees, shrubs, grasses, flowers, vines, brambles, and even dead trees, known as "snags." Those birds that don't migrate will need seeds and berries to carry them through the winter, as well as pines or other non-deciduous trees and shrubs to offer protection from snow and cold temperatures.

It is best if you can plant in levels, extending from taller trees at the top, down through shrubs to flowers and ground covers, since different birds live and feed at different heights. These should be grouped, rather than planted as individual specimens, and can be placed along the border of your property or as "islands" in your yard.

Hedges are also very enticing to birds, especially if you have the space to make them at least eight feet wide. If you have

an out-of-the-way corner, many bird species will appreciate a thicket of blackberries, raspberries, honeysuckle bushes, or native roses.

Keep in mind that these plants, while offering both food and excellent nesting sites, can become invasive, so only include them if you can keep them under control with mowing.

If you have a dead tree trunk that is not endangering any structure, keep it in place and add ivy or other vines to disguise it and offer protection to birds. Many species use snags even without any green covering, both for food and nest holes.

If most of the trees on your property are deciduous, losing their leaves in winter, you might consider collecting discarded Christmas trees and tie them to posts to create a windbreak and shelter during the winter months.

They will remain green until warmer weather, at which time they can be discarded, perhaps by forming a brush pile that will provide year-round shelter for a variety of wildlife.

By studying plant descriptions before buying, you can plan a habitat that includes food sources throughout the year. Many birds nest when natural food sources are at their peak, giving them easy access and allowing more time to tend their young.

**Since many birds return to nest in the same area year after year, providing the favorite foods of the species**

**that you want to attract is the best way to increase their population in your yard.**

### **Water**

All wildlife needs water, and birds are no exception. Birds both drink water and bathe in it.

While they seem to get great enjoyment from bathing, it is also necessary for their survival. Their wings get bent and out of position during normal activities, so grooming while bathing keeps them ready for flight. As the feathers slide through their beaks, they are also spreading oils that keep them waterproof and maintain their insulating properties. Some birds that don't come to seed feeders, such as robins, will still entertain you by coming to bathe.

**The easiest way to provide water for birds is with a simple birdbath. It should be located about 15" from shrubbery but, since a wet bird cannot fly as easily, there should be clear space around it so that predators are easily spotted.**

If there are cats in the area, put the bath on a pedestal about 40" off the ground. The placement should not be anywhere that chemicals can drift into the water and, while there are many creative materials that can be made into birdbaths, it should not be lead-lined.

A birdbath can be any size, but 24"-36" in diameter seems to be the most popular for a wide variety of birds. It shouldn't be slippery and, since birds have a natural fear of deep water, should gradually

slope down to no deeper than 3". A rock in the middle, or an upside-down flowerpot with a branch stuck in it, makes an enticing perch. Clean the bath often and add fresh water.

**Birds are especially attracted to moving water, so you might want to consider incorporating a drip or spray into your birdbath.**

This can be accomplished simply, by suspending a bucket with a small hole above the bath and letting water drip out, or more elaborately with a series of containers creating a waterfall effect. There are many kits on the market, or you can buy a recirculating pump and create your own design.

Although birds can get moisture from snow, having free-flowing water available in the winter is a big benefit and allows them to bathe as needed. There are relatively inexpensive outdoor heaters especially made for birdbath use, and you will find it delightful to watch birds enjoy the water during the colder months.

If you choose not to maintain your birdbath during the winter, turn it upside down so that water won't freeze in it and cause cracking.

### **Food**

Many times, when we think of food in connection with birds, we picture only mixed birdseed. While seed has its place, there are many kinds of preferred food, just as there are many species of birds.

Breeding season for many birds coincides with the

## **RECOMMENDED PLANTS**

*The following plants are popular with a variety of birds. This is a very small sampling of possibilities. For additional suggestions, consult guidebooks, a nature center or extension service, local nurseries, or the Internet.*

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### **LARGE TREES:**

Birch  
Crab Apple  
Hawthorn  
Hemlock  
Pine  
Spruce  
Dogwood  
Hackberry  
Mountain Ash  
Oak  
Tupelo  
Mulberry

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### **SMALL TREES AND SHRUBS:**

Buckthorn  
Holly  
Serviceberry  
Sumac  
Barberry  
Bayberry  
Elderberry  
Blackberry  
Rose  
Viburnum  
Blueberry  
Pyracantha

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### **PERENNIAL FLOWERS:**

Purple Coneflower  
Aster  
Coreopsis  
Goldenrod  
Globe Thistle  
Butterfly Flower  
Rudbeckia  
Statice  
Columbine  
Scabiosa  
Chrysanthemum

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### **VINES:**

Honeysuckle  
Fiveleaf Akebia  
Virginia Creeper  
English Ivy  
Bittersweet  
Grape  
Trumpet Vine

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### **ANNUAL FLOWERS:**

Cosmos  
Zinnia  
Sunflower  
Cleome  
Gloriosa Daisy  
Ageratum  
Fuschia  
Dianthus  
Sea Lavender  
Marigold  
California Poppy  
Lantana

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### **GRASSES:**

Little Blue Stem  
Tufted Hair Grass  
Bulbous Oat Grass  
Miscanthus  
Pampas Grass

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### **SEEDS:**

Black Oil Sunflower  
Black-Striped Sunflower  
White Proso Millet  
Grey-Striped Sunflower  
Niger (thistle)  
Hulled Sunflower

availability of their favorite natural food. While supplementing with various kinds of birdseed is good, birds have existed for at least 140 million years and have evolved along with the native plants that supply most of their nourishment.

There are about 8,650 species of birds in the world, 796 of them in North America, and some have very specialized eating habits. Those that rely largely on insects appreciate a garden free of pesticides and will devour many pests for you safely and at no cost.

If you study the birds, you will see that the shape of the bill is one clue to what kind of food they prefer. The bills of seed-eating birds, such as cardinals, finches, and sparrows are strong, cone-shaped, and often have some kind of cutting edge to help them get into the inside kernel.

Contrast that with the hummingbird, with his long tube for reaching deep into flowers, or the woodpecker whose bill is hard enough to chisel into wood, yet sensitive enough to feel the vibrations of insects behind the bark.

Robins don't have such efficient bills, but their eyesight allows them to see earthworms moving just beneath the soil, while swallows have strong wings and wide bills to catch insects right out of the air. To further complicate things, baby birds often require a different diet from their parents!

The more you learn about the birds in your area, the

more obvious it will become that it requires variety to keep them all satisfied.

**No one garden will be sufficient for all the birds, but by choosing your plants with care, you can develop a yard that will attract many different species.**

Buying birdseed is still going to remain a popular pastime, and there are a number of styles of feeders on the market, as well as a variety of seeds chosen to appeal to different birds.

**Seed preferences have been studied at length, and the most appealing overall seed is black oil sunflower. Two other popular seeds are niger (commonly called thistle) and white proso millet.**

Buying specific seeds may seem to cost more, but there is a lot more waste with "all-purpose" seed mixes which include unpopular seeds and fillers.

When eating seeds, different birds prefer different types of presentation. Some like to eat up high, from feeders that swing freely, while others want a flat, stable platform at a lower level. Still others prefer to eat right off the ground.

**As with your plantings, offer a variety of feeders at different levels to attract the largest number of birds.**

In addition to birdseed, you might want to offer other types of food, such as fruit – including oranges, apples, grapes, and fruit cocktails – and nectar, most often offered in hummingbird feeders.

Commercial mixes are available, or you can combine one part sugar to four parts boiled water. Never use honey, as this can cause illness, and clean the feeder often to prevent bacteria growth. Bread, table scraps, and salted foods are not recommended.

In the winter, when birds need a diet higher in fat to maintain sufficient body temperature, suet can be offered. In the warmer months, peanut butter mixed with cornmeal is a good substitute since it won't spoil so easily in the heat. It can be spread right on the bark of a tree to attract woodpeckers.

As with birdbaths, feeders need to be in easy flight reach of shrubs, but have open areas around them for visibility.

They should be cleaned regularly, and seed hulls should be removed periodically from beneath them to avoid the formation of mold. The seed in the feeders should be protected from moisture. Some bird species need grit in their diet to digest their food and would appreciate some sand nearby.

## **Nesting**

A sure sign that you are meeting the needs of birds is their willingness to nest in your yard. Mated pairs work very hard to choose the right site, and must consider many factors including shelter, safety, access to food and water, and appropriate conditions for fledging the young. There must also be adequate materials available for actually building the nest.

This is often a problem today because in addition to cutting down dead trees which would

have made suitable nesting sites and over-pruning shrubs, we tend to keep our yards so well-groomed that there is little left in the way of twigs, long grasses, and other popular nesting supplies.

To compensate, early in the spring offer such things as twigs, bits of string (no longer than 8"), strips of cloth, hair, fur, and soft stuffing. Keeping these items in piles rather than randomly scattered means less effort for the parents once they start to build.

Those species that use mud to construct nests will appreciate a trash can lid sunk a bit in the ground and filled with clay soil that is kept wet.

To replace the dead tree cavities, bird nesting boxes are the usual choice. There are many styles to choose from, often with very specific opening sizes to suit particular species. The house should have no moving parts or outside perches that can ease the way for predators, although cleats on the inside below the opening are helpful for fledging the young when the time comes to leave the nest.

**Except for aluminum homes for purple martins, bird nesting boxes should not be made of metal, which gets hot, nor of plastic which allows moisture to build up.**

Wood is generally preferred, and it should have holes for ventilation and drainage, and a hinged top, front, or side for easy cleaning at the end of the season. It is a good idea to put a new box up in the late summer or early fall, so that you can be sure that it will indeed be shaded during the summer

months, and to allow it to weather a bit before occupancy.

Predator guards are available, and there should be a shrub or tree 5'-15' away. Food sources nearby reduce the searching for parents, leaving them more time to tend their babies. It may take several seasons for birds to find and use your houses, but be patient.

Although birds often claim a territory and will not let others of the same species nest there, it is not unusual to have 10 different nesting boxes per acre used by different kinds of birds.

Although some are tolerant of human interest, it is safest not to look in on the eggs or babies and risk frightening the parents into abandoning the nest.

On page 3 you will find a list of plants that are popular with a variety of bird species. This is a small sampling of possibilities. For additional suggestions, consult nature guides, neighbors, a local nature center or extension service, local nurseries, or the Internet.

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