

BIRDS WELCOME!

(How to Enjoy a Habitat-Friendly Garden)

A backyard habitat is a “welcome mat” for visiting, nesting, and migrating birds. With the proper planning and the right plantings, your yard can become a refuge for those feathery friends looking to establish roots (building nests) or just stopping to enjoy a robust meal. Visiting songbirds, of course, provide us with hours of entertainment. Here’s how you can turn your yard into a Safe Harbor for birds.

MAKE A PLAN (long and short term).

Make a sketch. Map out a landscape design for your yard. Putting your ideas on paper will help you reach your intended goals. With the proper plan, you can enjoy a wildlife-friendly and colorful garden.

Consider space and plantings. Inventory plantings already in place and decide what trees, shrubs or flowering plants to keep or remove. Birds and plants thrive in areas that offer sun, shelter from the wind, some shade, plenty of water and food. Open space is important, too. Design your habitat with these complimentary elements in mind.

Choosing plants. Different plantings (trees, shrubs, and flowers) attract different wildlife visitors. Don’t overlook fruit-bearing plants. To encourage a variety of wildlife to frequent your garden, choose diverse plantings; wildflowers, weeds, perennials and annuals, set out in informal and formal groupings. You will see a variety of birds visiting all day long. And, be sure to include plantings that provide cover and food throughout the year. New Jersey native plants benefit wildlife and offer ornamental appeal. These should be among your first choices in selecting plantings. Every concerned gardener knows never to use invasive plants. (See our list of suggested plantings.)

Think about watering. By selecting native vegetation, suitable to shore gardens, watering can be kept to a minimum. Misting is a good method of water conservation and provides efficient usage of this resource.

Good news! Forget about the big fall clean up. And, keep spring-cleaning to a minimum. For those birds that winter in your area, leaves and summer bloom-offs provide seeds and shelter from the cold winds of winter as well as excellent hiding spots from marauding predators. Fall leaves, flower stalks, woodpiles, and all those other “hideaways” host next year’s food for our migrating bird friends. They love the seeds and berries from last year’s flowers and feast on those tiny insects hatching in the spring.

FEEDERS

Backyard feeding requires some planning. Food can always be tossed about to attract birds, but seeds tossed on the ground are exposed to the elements and quickly become contaminated (i.e., mold, bacteria, fertilizers). To avoid possible illness or disease to the birds, a feeder is the best choice.

A simple piece of wood holding seeds, elevated only inches off the ground, will attract the birds (as well as other wildlife, of course). The alternative is either to build or buy a more formal structure, a platform feeder. If you decide to install a permanent feeder, consider the following guidelines. Place the feeder in a location where viewing from inside your house will give maximum pleasure. Winter is a time when birds are most under stress so a feeder that is easily replenished even in the worst weather is important. Ease of replenishment should be considered.

You certainly will have visits from squirrels. These agile rodents can leap ten feet or more to reach either a hanging (from a branch) feeder or a “squirrel proof,” pole-style feeder. A properly placed, pole-mounted metal house-type or a pole with a baffle is the most squirrel-resistant style. But squirrels are persistent fellows and even the best-placed feeder may cease to be “squirrel proof” at some point!

When installing a birdfeeder, the need for ground clean up (bird droppings, seeds, and seed casings) is often overlooked. Feathered visitors to a feeder tend to be selective with their feeding routine and scatter seeds indiscriminately in their search for favorite nuts and seeds. Try to avoid placing a feeder near walking areas.

The choice of seed placed in the feeder will determine what birds will be attracted. You may want to install more than one feeder and use different food in each. Decide what birds you wish to attract and select their favorite snacks. Sunflower seeds are the most widely accepted. Birds do not like cereal grains (i.e., oats, corn, wheat). Also, birds will ignore artificially processed foods such as berry pellets and “seeds” flavored and dyed to resemble natural seeds and nuts. Finally, be sure to clean the feeders regularly, using soap and hot water.

PROVIDE A SOURCE OF FRESH WATER FOR DRINKING AND BATHING

Fountains. The sound of moving or dripping water will attract many birds as well as providing a soothing sound in your garden. Be sure to keep the water fresh and clean. Do not use chemicals to do this.

Bird Baths. Be sure to place these close to a sturdy shrub or tree so that birds that stop for a refreshing drink and choose to stay for a bath will have safe cover for perching while wet feathers dry before they take flight. It is very important to keep the still water of birdbaths clean and fresh. Scrub the bathing bowl frequently and rinse thoroughly.

Misters. They provide a fine, refreshing mist and are best placed in a shrub or tree with cup-shaped leaves to trap drops of water for drinking and bathing. They can be attached to a faucet and tubing run to the location you select. Misters use very little water and provide constant fresh water for your feathered friends.

For more information and recommended books, check the N.J. Audubon Society website: www.njaudubon.org

HOW TO BE BUTTERFLY AND HUMMINGBIRD FRIENDLY!

April arrives and, if your garden is ready, you'll delight in the return of hummingbirds, including the Ruby-throated species (the east's only breeding member of the many varieties of hummingbirds). Don't overlook the seasonal return of other favorites, specifically those colorful moths and exciting butterflies. Hummingbird and butterfly feeders, along with well thought out plantings, will entice these seasonal beauties to make your garden their home. Here's how to begin:

MAKE A PLAN (Long and short-term)

Survey your yard. Make a sketch to map out your habitat design. You will need to select a sunny location, one that offers shelter. Hummingbirds and butterflies seek nectar from flowers and shrubs in full, daylong sun that also offer shelter from the winds. Include early blooming plants and those that will bloom right up to the first frost. Late blooming plants are key for both migrating Monarchs and departing hummingbirds.

Inventory what plantings are already in your yard. Decide what new plantings you would like to add and what plants and shrubs that are already in your garden should be kept. A yard of varied plantings; wildflowers, weeds, perennials and annuals in informal and formal groupings, ensures a haven for arriving butterflies and hummingbirds. (See our list of plant selections and suggestions).

Think about watering. By selecting native vegetation, suitable to shore gardens, watering can be kept to a minimum. Misting is a good method of water conservation and provides efficient usage of this resource.

Good news! Forget about Fall clean up; keep Spring clean up to a minimum. Fall leaves, flower stalks, wood piles, these "hideaways" host next year's Luna moths and some butterflies (eggs, caterpillars, or chrysalis stage), and provide seed heads and shelter throughout the winter for birds.

FEEDERS

Butterflies will be overjoyed to find fruit trees in your yard. However, if you don't have the tree, the fruit will make them just as happy! Also, fruit that has become just too ripe (even better, rotten) is perfect for a homemade Butterfly Feeder. An old plate, suspended from a tree (use an old planter hanger to keep the feeder off the ground and away from the ants), can hold small slices of rotted fruit to create a veritable banquet. Mashed bananas seem the meal-of-choice, but melon, peaches and/or pears are also appreciated. A little orange juice sprinkled occasionally on the drying fruit will add needed moisture and delight your "guests."

When the first hummingbirds begin to arrive in April, early-blooming, nectar-producing flowers may be in short supply. For these early birds, feeders can do much to encourage the birds to stay and, hopefully, to nest.

April through October is the most effective time to supplement natural nectar by providing a feeding solution of sugar and water (one part sugar to four parts water). Note: A stronger solution (more sugar, less water) can be harmful to a bird's digestive system; the use of honey can lead to a fungus disease in hummingbirds that could be fatal. Feeders must be kept clean and fresh. Wash your feeder weekly (more often in hot weather) with hot soapy water, followed by a good rinsing with boiling hot water. Then be sure to add fresh feeding solution. Male hummingbirds, the earliest arrivals, tend to dominate a feeder so placing two or three feeders in your garden gives "the girls" a chance! You may like to keep your feeders up until mid-December; although hummingbirds have departed, other migrant fowl may visit and stay a day or two before moving on.