Plants to Feed the Birds

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The sights and sounds of both resident and migrating birds can add delight and stimulation to your life. So how do you get them to come to your backyard? Birds will come if they can find food, cover and water. To have a diversity of birds, you need to plan and manage for the birds you want to attract. Desirable birds in your yard can enhance your surroundings. Saving the natural vegetation will make your yard much more attractive to birds than a house with a landscape with only turfgrass and trees.

You have to decide on your objectives when landscaping your backyard for birds. Objectives could be beautifying your yard, increasing the value of your property, providing habitat for migrating birds, attracting certain species such as hummingbirds, or controlling other species such as house sparrows. Your objectives in attracting birds will determine how you landscape. For example, Brown Thrashers and Common Pauraque both require dense shrubs and rows of hedges next to cleared areas such as lawns. Common Pauraque can often be heard calling throughout the night in sparsely populated areas of the county. Wintering American Robins eat earthworms and need grassy areas to find them. Robins also relish the fruit of shrubs found frequently in the coastal oak woods. Keeping house sparrows at bay may mean leaving lots of the native understory in a landscape that is far removed from the areas they frequent, and not putting out the welcome mat with bird feed that they like.

A good bird landscape has a diversity of plant types and species that provide fruit and insects. Make a list of plants that provide food and cover. Trees such as Live Oaks are an excellent food source for birds, primarily insects for warblers, and they provide good cover. All species of hackberries provide an important winter fruit for many birds and are the larval food source for several types of butterflies. Hackberries native to our area are Sugarberry, Netleaf hackberry, and Spiny hackberry. Other good trees for our area include evergreen Anacua with its yellow fruit in the fall; deciduous Red Mulberry with dark purple edible fruit in the spring; evergreen Red Bay producing blue-black fruit; and deciduous Black Willow, thriving in moist areas, attracting birds for its insects.

Ornamental grasses like Little bluestem, Bushy bluestem, Big bluestem, Gulf Muhly, Inland sea oats, Indian grass, Rosette grass, and other grasses produce seeds for seed-eating birds such as Painted buntings and Indigo buntings.

A diverse range of native shrubs will produce fruit for fruit-eating birds. Look on your property to see if you need to add both evergreen and deciduous shrubs. Shrubs that occur naturally here are Yaupon holly, American beautyberry, Wax myrtle, Agarita, Barbados Cherry, and Farkleberry. Female yaupon holly produces berries that are eaten by mockingbirds, cedar waxwings, thrushes, catbirds, and thrashers, and provides good cover and nesting sites for many bird species. A deciduous shrub, American Beautyberry sports fall clusters of purple fruit along the stems that are relished by mockingbirds and other fruit eating birds. Boasting the most birds attracted, up to forty, Wax myrtle grows under the live oak canopy and produces grey-blue waxy fruit all along the stems of female plants. Agarita is our evergreen native shrub with Christmas holly-shaped leaves. It sports spring yellow flowers followed by red fruit that you may have to fight with the birds to pick for mouth-watering Agarita Jelly. Barbados cherry is an attractive small evergreen shrub producing pink flowers and red edible fruit simultaneously. You will definitely love not only the name Farkleberry, but also the clusters of white bell-shaped spring flowers, red tinted trunks and stems, peeling bark, red leaves in the fall and winter, and the blue-black tiny little blueberry-like fruit of this blueberry relative. Impossible to find in garden centers, look for Farkleberry on your property in the native understory, or beg a neighbor for a start.

There are too many nectar producing plants that grow naturally here to mention all of them, so here we include bird favorites. Most of the nectar plant blooms coincide with major migrating times. Spring migrating hummingbirds rely on the bright red tubular flowers of Coral Bean shrubs in late March and April. Another spring bloomer is high-climbing Crossvine with its coral-colored tubular clusters of flowers. A similar, but much more aggressive vine is Trumpet creeper with bright orange flowers that hummers cannot resist. Very mannerly Coral honeysuckle vines bloom spring throughout fall giving away their sweet nectar to both migrating and nesting hummingbirds. Turk’s Cap evergreen shrubs start blooming with red tubular flowers in the summer that feed nectar to summer resident and fall migrating hummingbirds. Perennial salvias of all colors and varieties are popular with all nectar feeding birds, but especially hummingbirds. A native species of note is Scarlet sage with bright red clusters of flowers. Scarlet sage likes our shady live oak woods but also thrives in sunny gardens where it can reach three feet tall. Keep it clipped shorter and let it seed to its heart’s content to create a groundcover banquet of red for the hummers. Other equally good salvias are Mealy blue sage, especially the more drought tolerant sun-loving Henry Duelberg selection, and Indigo Spires which likes partial shade in our hot summers.

Equally balance grassy-weedy areas, shrubs and trees for a diverse landscape for your special birds. Your own special combinations of trees, shrubs, vines, grasses, and perennials will vary, depending on the needs of the selected bird species and your own aesthetic desires for your landscape.