



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Attracting Birds to the Residential Back Yard (March 2021)

by Donna K. Luallen, UCCE Master Gardener

Every year we have another opportunity to host guests who eat little, require no fresh towels and yet go about their business with spirit and determination.

Common birds to Visalia's back yards include doves, American Goldfinches, Yellow Rump Warblers, Ruby Crowned Kinglets, Cedar Waxwings and, of course, the beloved hummingbirds. The more varieties of food you offer, the more varieties of birds you will attract. Feeders can take the form of platforms (raised on a post or close to the ground), Nyjer or thistle socks, hoppers, tubes or suet cages.

Doves, sparrows, juncos and finches love sunflower seeds and white millet scattered on the ground or on platform feeders. Hoppers can also dispense these power-packed energy sources for the smaller birds, although doves may find the bases too small for their larger bodies. Thistle socks filled with the small, black Nyjer seed can become real favorites with the brilliant yellow Goldfinches and green-shaded Lesser Goldfinches and set the stage for some avian acrobatics as the birds tug at the seed. Suet cages filled with commercial suet blocks or a homemade blend of lard, peanut butter, cornmeal, dried fruit and peanut bits are favorites with Scrub Jays and several woodpecker species; it's probably best to put these away when temperatures climb into the 70s for spring, summer and fall, since they'll quickly dissolve into a gooey mess. A word of caution when choosing commercial bags of birdseed: many use fillers such as red millet that aren't suitable for birds of the west. If there's a beautiful cardinal on the package, read the label carefully.

Do keep feeders as clean as possible. Clean away bird droppings and mites every 10 days with a solution of 9:1 water and bleach. Birds are susceptible to mites and diseases that affect their feet and eyes, and feeders concentrate the risk of spreading disease. Hummingbird nectar feeders should be cleaned with hot soapy water every few days and thoroughly rinsed. Place bird feeders where feed and droppings can fall without being a nuisance.

To avoid all that fuss, why not provide more natural food forms, such as sunflowers for the seed-eaters and tubular flowers such as trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*) and rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) for the nectar-lovers. Or how about Toyons (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), which produce masses of red berries loved by Western Bluebirds and Robins, and create cover for warblers, sparrows and juncos. The strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*) has edible fruit, bell-like flowers in abundance and loves the Valley's summer heat. A favorite of hummingbirds and Lesser Goldfinches is Scarlet Sage (*Salvia coccinea*); the ravenous little finch will assume any pose he must to reach the seeds after blooms are finished.



When the feasting is over, don't be in a rush to remove the expired plants. Migrating birds need the defoliated branches and stems to rest in and forage for insects as they make those irrational journeys across continents.

The most important thing we can do for a bird is provide water. Birds will gravitate to the smallest mist, drip or bubbler. Providing water can be as simple as a milk jug filled with water with a pinhole or two suspended over a shallow dish no deeper than 1". Birdbaths are most appealing if they have an element of movement, such as a mister or agitator. Most birds will come to a water source three times a day for their drinks and baths. Again, cleanliness is more than just kindness.

For more information on attracting birds, go online to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (All About Birds) or talk with your local nursery. There are many good drought-tolerant shrubs and annuals that will add to your pleasure and the birds'. Or as you modify your yard to adjust to climate change, think about how to remove a water-hogging plant and replace it with a water-thrifty seed or berry producer, or a modest water feature to partner with these winged gems.

The Master Gardeners have cancelled all public events at this time, but if you send us an email or leave a message on our phone lines, someone will call you back!

Master Gardeners in Tulare County: (559) 684-3325; Kings County at (559) 852-2736

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