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## **Bringing Birds to Our Gardens** by Summer Brasuel UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

Birds are all around us; there are a lot more birds in our neighborhoods than you may think. Having birds in our gardens and watching them throughout the seasons brings added joy and pleasure to our homes, and they are beneficial to our gardens. Why? Because birds eat and thereby help control insect pests and garden weeds, and they also pollinate plants. But to attract them to our gardens, we must create a habitat that provides shelter and food. Here are several ways to provide for their needs and invite them in.

Plant trees and shrubs of varying heights. Consider mounding bushes and ornamental grasses for birds such as the California towhee and its cousin, the spotted towhee, to hide under; or small, medium, or tall trees from which the western bluebird and fly-catchers like the black phoebe or western wood peewee can hunt. Taller ground covers may provide nesting sites for our ground-nesting birds like dark-eyed juncos, hermit thrushes, and California quail.

Use plants that produce fruits, berries, seeds, and nectar. Many shrubs are showy year-round, with bright foliage and blossoms in spring or early summer that form berries or seeds that provide food for birds, including the gorgeous cedar waxwings which arrive in winter to feed on berries. Our natives, serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia* and *Amelanchier utahensis*), viburnum (*Viburnum ellipticum*) and toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*) are good examples (although care must be taken when including toyon in your garden, as it is toxic to humans in sufficient quantities). Trees that are native to El Dorado County and that produce seeds or berries include dogwoods (*Cornus spp.*), western redbud (*Cercis occidentalis*) and black hawthorn (*Crataegus douglasii*). Some great nectar-producing plants are the California fuchsia (*Epilobium canum*) and the many types of salvia, including Hot Lips (*Salvia microphylla* ‘Hot Lips’) or Black and Blue (*Salvia microphylla* ‘Black and Blue’).

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Install a bird bath or other water feature in your garden. Watching birds bathe through a window is delightful, and as an additional benefit, water features also attract butterflies!

Put up bird feeders in the garden to round out the supply of food throughout the seasons. Hummingbird feeders, seeds feeders, and suet feeders all attract different species of birds. And contrary to popular belief, bird feeders do not interfere with migration!

Provide good quality food in your feeders that birds can't resist! There is no need to put food coloring in hummingbird nectar. Use only white granulated sugar and water at a ratio of one part sugar to four parts water; other sweeteners can cause illnesses in hummingbirds. Other birds like sugar water, too, like the bright yellow bullock's oriole, lesser goldfinch, the flashy western tanager, and even the occasional acorn woodpecker!

Seed feeders can attract birds like nuthatches, chickadees, finches, sparrows, and the brightly colored singing virtuoso, the black-headed grosbeak. At higher elevations in El Dorado county you may attract the evening grosbeaks.

So now that we've invited them in, the next big question is: Which birds should we try to keep out of our gardens? Attracting birds to your *edible* garden may not be the best plan. Grosbeaks love fruit of all kinds, finches love sunflower leaves and seeds, many birds love pretty much any young sprout as it comes out of the ground. But protecting an edible garden from birds and other critters will have to be covered in a whole other article!

Currently we are in phase 2 resumption of activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Master Gardener events will for the foreseeable future be limited. Please see our calendar of events for learning opportunities.

We realize our public classes are valued by County residents and we especially appreciate your continued support and understanding during this public health challenge. Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard remotely and can still answer your questions. Leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512, or use the "Ask a Master Gardener" option on our website: [mgeldorado.ucanr.edu](http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu). We'll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

Stay safe and follow recommended health and sanitation practices in the coming weeks.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. If you are looking for garden inspiration, while our garden is closed due to COVID-19, our website has pictures, plants lists and much more. [http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration Garden](http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden). To sign up for notices and newsletters, see <http://ucanr.edu/master> gardener e-news.