

The Press Democrat
July 16, 2022

ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS

Creating a haven for birds



Delay deadheading flowers with seed heads like sunflowers. They provide food for birds.
JOHN BURGESS / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Question: I live in the middle of the city, in a neighborhood of small homes with small lots. With these limitations, what can I do to make my garden attractive to birds?

Answer: Birds will visit your garden, no matter its size, if you provide their essential habitat elements: food, water and shelter. To attract and support a wide variety of birds, follow these garden design guidelines:

Use native plants: California native plants provide the food and shelter that our local birds have adapted to over time. To provide healthy food resources for a diversity of birds, make room for native plants.

Many bird species are generalists in their food choices — that is, they are attracted to a variety of plants, regardless of their point of origin. But many nonnative ornamental plants are simply not attractive to our local birds, or their food resources are inferior to those of our native plants.

The National Audubon Society has a handy online tool that will send you a list of commercially available native plants based on your ZIP code. When you type in a Sonoma County ZIP code, you'll get a list of the 36 best native plants for birds in this area. Among these plants are California lilac (*Ceanothus* spp.) and manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* spp.); both host plants for caterpillars, a source of easily digestible protein for young birds.

The Audubon list includes native plants in Sonoma County that bear fruit for birds, such as coffeeberry (*Frangula californica*) and canyon gooseberry (*Ribes menziesii*). California figwort (*Scrophularia californica*) and bush monkey flower (*Diplacus aurantiacus*) provide nectar sources. Go to <https://bit.ly/3NfdROu> for more information.

Provide plants that offer cover:

Birds also need plants that provide cover for nesting or roosting, such as California lilac, manzanita and coffeeberry. Depending on how much room you have, you might include taller trees for raptors, flycatchers and other perching birds. Plant mid-level shrubs for finches, sparrows and wrens. Plant native ground covers for quail, towhees and juncos.

Maintain bird habitat: Delay deadheading flowers with seed heads to provide an important food source for wintering finches and sparrows. Prune trees in fall and winter, rather than in the spring and summer, to avoid disturbing nesting birds. If you have an appropriate location, you also could install nest boxes for cavity nesters such as bluebirds. See <https://bit.ly/3zU76P6> for more information on installing nest boxes.

Provide water: Provide a year-round water source. While larger gardens can support recycled water features such as ponds and streams, smaller gardens can provide a bird bath on a pedestal or a water feeder hung from a branch (both commercially available). Be sure to regularly clean those water sources to prevent disease-causing organisms from spreading.

Add bird feeders: If you have a bird-friendly yard, you don't need to provide supplemental food. But bird feeders are a great way to observe the bird life in your garden. Make sure to regularly clean your bird feeders to minimize the spread of bird diseases.

Avoid Pesticides: Many backyard birds eat insects; 96% of all bird species feed insects to their young. Using pesticides reduces insect populations in your garden and deprives many bird species of food. If you can, stop using pesticides altogether. If you must use them, apply them to targeted plants or specific areas in the garden and let birds provide pest control services for the rest of your garden. If you have a significant insect or disease problem, treat it only with organic products that you apply sparingly and infrequently. If you are concerned about mice and rats in your yard, try trapping rather than using poison bait. Owls and hawks die from eating poisoned rodents.

Keep cats indoors: Free-roaming cats kill an estimated 2.4 billion birds in the U.S. every year, according to the American Bird Conservancy. Young birds are particularly vulnerable. Consider building a "catio," an enclosed space in the garden where your cat can enjoy the outdoors without risk to local birds. Visit the American Bird Conservancy website at <https://bit.ly/3bcra4Z> for more information on catios.

Prevent window collisions: Up to 1 billion birds die every year in the U.S. from colliding with windows. Visit the American Bird Conservancy website at <https://bit.ly/3zVuz2C> to find out how to prevent window collisions.



Bird feeders are a great way to observe the bird life in your garden. ASSOCIATED PRESS

Contributors to this week's column were Janet Bair, Karen Felker and Robert Williams. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County (sonomamg.ucanr.edu) provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.