# Designing a Garden for the Birds

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It’s so enjoyable watching the antics of robins, towhees, chickadees and even those raucous, brazen magpies. Especially if they are in your own yard; and creating a garden that attracts birds is easy if you create a habitat for them.

On the forest’s edge is an even richer habitat. This transition zone, the place between the forest and clearings, contains young trees, a multitude of shrubs and herbaceous plants that are rich in both food and shelter. It’s this in between zone that can be easily carried over to anyone’s yard.

Keep in mind that you want to create an oasis for birds, a place they can rest, eat and drink. In sparsely vegetated areas, even a garden of only a few plants can look good to birds. If they find your garden a great place to build a nest, all the better. There is nothing like watching a brood of little ones emerge.

One thing about creating a garden for birds is birds aren’t picky about garden styles. Whether your personal aesthetics espouse wildflower chaos, regimented perennial borders or something in between, chances are birds will stop by no matter what. What keeps them is letting them find what they’re looking for: food, water and shelter.

Especially during a drought, water is a big draw. If you don’t have a heater element in your birdbath to keep it from freezing in the winter, place a rock in the center to catch the sun’s heat and keep a bit of the ice melted.

Even with so many bird feeders around now, supplemental natural foods help round out birds’ diets. One of the best ways to augment feeders is to provide plants that provide a variety of meals, either through fruit or seed. Having plants whose fruit comes to maturity at different times of the year might keep birds around all the time. Persistent fruit is the term used to describe fruit that stays on stems long after it matures.

Following are suggestions for fruit trees and shrubs:

* **Early Summer Fruit:** chokecherries, manzanita, gooseberries
* **Midsummer Fruit:** blackberries, elderberries, buffaloberries, mulberries, serviceberry, Western sand cherry
* **Fall Fruit:** Viburnams, Mahonias, Amelancheirs, snowberry
* **Winter Fruit:** barberries, sumacs, hollies and crabapples

Birds also enjoy seeds produced by a variety of perennials. For good seed-producing plants, choose flowering ones like aster, Gaillardia, Echinacea, Helianthus maximiliana, Rudbeckia, California poppy, Solidago, marigold, phlox, salvia and zinnia varieties. Grasses include Andropogon, Festuca, and varieties of Miscanthus.

Dandelions and thistles, those “weeds” we try to eliminate, also produce good seed for birds. Maybe leave them this year and see what happens to the bird population around your house.

Shelter is another element you might consider when creating a garden for birds. In the summertime, birds need shelter from the sun. In the wintertime and early spring, they need protection from the wind, rain and cold. Year round, the kinds of birds that will frequent your garden might need protection from raptors. Low, dense shrubs planted provide good protection from the occasional hawk overhead. Shrubs for shelter should have dense branching and lots of leaves.

Birds love vines, too. Consider planting Virginia Creeper and Boston Ivy. These also take advantage of the vertical space in your garden as well as provide camouflage for small songbirds.

Remember that deciduous trees might be great protection in the summertime, but evergreens offer year round protection. Stout needled conifers like spruce and the Austrian and Bosnian pines provide excellent refuge.

Birds need shelter for a variety of reasons, and if you try to meet their sheltering needs, they’ll return again and again—maybe even to set up a nest. There’s nothing like watching birds raise a brood of young. Trees and shrubs for nesting should have branches that can support a nest. You can also encourage nesting by contributing to a supply of nesting materials—straw, string, horse or dog hair, and cotton. Arrange these near and in trees.

It is so pleasurable to look out the window and see birds happily engrossed in your garden. And all you need to do to create a bird haven is give them what they want.