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Bring in the Birds

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Gardens can serve as far more than ornamental spaces—they can also function as important habitats for native bird species. A well-designed backyard habitat provides reliable food and water sources, protective cover, and safe nesting areas that support birds throughout the seasons.

Amelanchier x grandiflora Autumn Brilliance is an example of a fruiting shrub that attracts birds.

Resources for Creating Biodiversity in the Garden

In Doug Tallamy's book "Bringing Nature Home," he explores myriad approaches a homeowner can take to create biodiversity attractive to many native animals, including birds. He states if you could only plant one plant or one tree on your property, you should plant a white oak (*Quercus alba*). There have been studies that show the native white oak is a host plant for many insects. In turn, it's a great habitat for birds that feed on the larvae of these insects, including woodpeckers, nuthatches, warblers, wrens, chickadees and thrushes. During the spring migration, I can look up into the canopy of an oak and easily identify sometimes five to 10 species of warblers.

Fruits and Berries to Attract Birds

In the garden, many fruiting trees and shrubs can provide great ornamental value and an important food source for many bird species.

The hawthorns, Crataegus, provide an abundance of orange-red fruits, especially in the winter when it's not uncommon for their fruits to persist. Most hawthorns have a dense canopy and thorns on their branches that provide good protection for nesting birds. *Crataegus viridis* Winter King is a native hawthorn with large, plump orange-red fruits. Considerable work has been done recently to taxonomically classify Crataegus and there are thought to be 150 to 190 species in North America. The Cedar Waxwing and American Robin are frequent visitors.

Hollies (Ilex) also have persistent fruits. The winterberry holly, a deciduous holly, is grown for its ornamental fruits that can last from September to March. *Ilex verticillata* Winter Red has striking red fruits and Winter Gold has salmon-colored fruits.

There are many fruit and berry sources noted for the antioxidant-rich fruits, like the many species of serviceberry, Amelanchier. *Amelanchier x grandiflora* Autumn Brilliance is a PHS Gold Medal recipient noted for its white flowers

in May, an abundance of fruits that change from pink to purple and an excellent red fall color. Certain native viburnums can be considered as a food source in the garden, including the arrowwood, *Viburnum dentatum*; maple leaf viburnum, *Viburnum acerifolium*; possumhaw, *Viburnum nudum*; and many others.

There's been considerable breeding and selection work done with chokeberries (Aronia) in recent years. The red chokeberry, *Aronia arbutifolia* Brilliantissima, is a selection that's been around for decades. This upright shrub has a fire engine-red fall color and a late summer abundance of plump red berries.



Attracting Birds with Seed Sources

There are many native seed-eating birds, including the American goldfinch, song sparrow, grosbeaks, northern cardinal and the towhees. Providing reliable seed sources throughout the seasons is an important way to support birds in the garden.

Rudbeckia American Gold Rush is a great source of seeds for birds.

Many of the native composites are important seed sources for birds. There are several species of coneflower, including the purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) and the pale coneflower (*Echinacea pallida*) known for their purple to pink flowers and prominent seed cones in the center of the flower. These can be left standing throughout the winter to provide a food source for goldfinches and sparrows. Similarly, the rudbeckias produce a central cone of seeds. *Rudbeckia hirta* and the giant coneflower, *Rudbeckia maxima*, are both highly ornamental with striking golden yellow flowers, as well as good seed sources. There are many native species of liatris, including the blazing star, *Liatris spicata*. These prairie natives are known for their upright stalks of purple flowers that are followed by fluffy seeds.

There are many outstanding native ornamental grasses that provide great vertical architectural qualities in the garden while also serving as a very important food source in the fall and throughout the winter. It's important to leave these grasses up for the winter so overwintering birds have a seed source. The switchgrass, *Panicum virgatum*, has upright foliage and airy flower heads followed by seed heads. Northwind is an exceptional selection. Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) has fluffy white seed heads. Standing Ovation has upright bluish foliage that turns maroon and burgundy in the fall. Smoke Signal is an upright selection that turns purple and red in the fall. Jazz is a more compact selection well-suited to smaller gardens.

Creating Bird Habitats

Planting a diverse array of native trees, shrubs, grasses, vines and perennials that produce seeds, fruits and nectar throughout the seasons is essential for supporting bird populations. Leaving perennial stems and seed heads standing through winter also provides important habitat value. Many beneficial insects and overwintering larvae spend the colder months within hollow stems and leaf litter before emerging in spring, creating an additional food source for birds during nesting season.

Providing a water source is a key element to creating a stable bird habitat. A pond is ideal, but even a traditional birdbath is sufficient.

Even the smallest garden, patio or planting bed can play a meaningful role in strengthening local biodiversity. By thoughtfully designing gardens with habitat value in mind, gardeners can create landscapes that are not only beautiful, but also alive with birdsong, movement and seasonal activity. **GP**

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