

Bringing Birds to Your Garden

by Nancy Bliss

As a gardener, I find that birds are both a blessing and a curse. They give us many moments of joy and delight watching them eat, bicker with one another, bathe, and just give us beauty and peace. Watching birds in my backyard is one of the few things that will help me be still and enjoy the loveliness, the variety and beauty and peace of creation around my foothill home and the mountains surrounding it.

However, when those little ones start eating my swiss chard, my basil and even my dahlias, I have to take a step back and remind myself that there is a balance in this world, perhaps I can share with these little thieves as they also eat the insects that pester my garden, they pollinate plants and flowers, they bring music and fun with them as well. So, I decide that I want to continue to bring birds to my garden.

So, what do they need? There are three main things: food, water and shelter.

Water is essential for all life and that includes birds. They need it for drinking and for bathing. When providing a water feature for birds, it can be a small fountain, or a birdbath, or a pond, but there are a couple of things to bear in mind. First is safety. Take into consideration the safety of these feathered friends. Do not set them up for a tasty treat of the predators that abound in our neighborhoods; cats; hawks. Cats take an enormous toll on our bird populations every year. Secondly, make sure that the water is clean and not too deep to make bathing easy. Watching a bird bathe is fun and funny. They love running water, so a small fountain or a tiny stream is popular.

To attract birds to your backyard it helps to have a variety of landscape sizes. Lower landscapes, shrubs for shelter and for food as well as trees for nesting. Manzanita, coffee berry, and toyon are examples of shrubs. These provide shelter in their branches, flowers for nectar in the spring or summer and berries in late summer or fall, even winter when there is little food available. Grasses, flowers, both annuals and perennials will add color and beauty to your yard as well as nectar and seed for many bird species. Sunflowers will grow tall and lovely and provide seed that many birds love. Other choices include buckwheat, ceanothus (California lilac), California fuchsia (*Epilobium*, formerly **Zauschneria**). Hummingbirds and butterflies are drawn to sages and salvias.

Plant varieties that will provide food at different times of the year. Start with natives. Toyon provides both food and shelter. Cedar waxwings will come in flocks to feast on the berries of these native shrubs. Another bird-friendly shrub is a Black Elderberry as well as currants (which will not take as much room for growing if that is an issue), both will provide berries later in the year. Food for birds is in shorter supply during winter and early spring. As you plant and plan your gardens, reduce pesticide use whenever possible to keep all of us healthy.

Almost all terrestrial birds will feed insects to their young. Insects are higher in protein and fat and that's the only way they can really get their babies up to speed. Even hummingbirds feed insects to their young! From hatch to leaving the nest in 2-3 weeks is an enormously short time

to gain enough weight and put on enough feathers to be ready to fend for yourself out in the wild, so the parents have to go for the densest food they can get. Our black oaks provide caterpillars which are one of those really dense foods (and something I'd love to see be consumed at times!) So, they eat my swiss chard. Oh well!

Take a moment, find a quiet place where there are trees, water, or flowers; in your own backyard, a park, a quiet neighborhood. Sit a spell and watch, listen. They hop, they sing, they fly, they chirp. Snap a picture. Enjoy.

Nancy Bliss is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County.

UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/ You can also find us on Facebook.