

Trees, Shrubs & Perennials for Attracting Birds and Other Wildlife

Craig R. Miller
Water Conservation Specialist
Parker Water & Sanitation District



Creating a backyard oasis that mimics the wilderness is the goal of many wildlife enthusiasts. While others install fences, put out poison baits or chemical deterrents, these people want to attract birds, critters, and even deer to their gardens.

- The compulsion to tidy and groom our landscapes, whether spraying the lawn with pesticides, raking up leaf litter, or pruning shrubs and trees to rigid shapes, is not friendly to wildlife.
- A typical yard with lawn, raked flower beds, and specimen shade trees does not provide the diversity needed to attract wildlife. It may be tidy, but it provides habitat for very few native species.
- “Wildscaping”, on the other hand, growing a variety of native or adapted plants in a natural arrangement that includes diverse shapes, colors, flowers, and fruits, is a boon to wildlife.
- Start small: choose an area of lawn to replace with a mix of native shrubs, perennial flowers, and wild grasses. By selecting plants that provide different heights and forms, foliage, and flowers with varying blooming times that provide an assortment of fruits and seeds, you’ll add interest - both human and wild - year round.
- A “wild” garden doesn’t have to look sloppy: Arrange the plants to enhance the space they’ll occupy, considering their eventual shape, size, and habit of growth and bloom.
- Cluster plants for maximum impact by grouping 3 or 5 plants of the same species. Placing clusters to contrast colors, foliage, and blooming time can be pleasing. Magenta poppy mallows, for example, open in mid-morning, and close at night, while yellow Missouri evening primrose does the opposite, unfurling its petals in the evening to bloom until wilted by the next day’s sun.
- Add structural diversity by mixing tall plants, mid-sized and shorter plants, and ground-hugging plants to allow wildlife to move from one part of the wildscape to another. Strips of plants running between different habitat areas allow small critters a corridor for safe travel.
- Resist tidiness: leave organic litter in place to mulch the soil, don’t cut back dead stalks until spring to leave seeds for food, prune thoughtfully, and avoid using pesticides.
- Mulch shades the soil, keeping it cool on hot summer days and warmer in winter. It holds moisture and decomposes to release organic matter that helps plants grow.
- Dead leaves may hide the cocoons of butterflies; a dense tree provides camouflage and thermal protection for the tiny nests of hummingbirds.
- If you have pest problems, start with the least invasive remedy. Most pesticides kill everything they encounter - even though less than one percent of North America’s animal, plant, and microbe species are considered pests.

- Learn what a weed is and what a native plant is. The latter are important for their established relationships with wildlife and other plants; regardless of whether they suit our aesthetics or not, native plants are the backbone of wild communities.
- Sagebrush, for example, is often called a weed. But this tough and fragrant native shrub is an integral part of western landscapes and is essential to the survival of many native species, including pronghorn, sage thrashers, and two species of sage-grouse.
- Tumbleweed, on the other hand, is a true weed, an annual native to the steppes of central Asia that crowds out native species. Spotted knapweed and Canada thistle are also true weeds.

Attract Birds to Your Yard and Garden

- It takes more than a feeder and a birdbath to make your yard truly bird friendly. Birds need a complete habitat that provides food, shelter, nesting areas, and singing posts from which to defend their territories.

A Bird Pantry

- Birds get their food not only from the fruits of plants but from their buds, flowers, and nectar. You may want to select plants that provide food in each of these ways.
- Select plants to provide food for birds in every season. Fruits ripen in different seasons. Plants with spring-ripening fruits that feed new parent birds include serviceberries, wild cherries, and mulberries.
- In fall, migrating birds look for the ripening fruits of cotoneaster, mountain ash and buffaloberry. Other plants bear fruits that persist through the winter providing an important source of nutrients when the ground is covered with snow. These plants include viburnum, sumac, hawthorn, and crabapple.
- Not all berries are consumed by all bird species. In some cases, fruits may be too large for a bird to swallow. Use a diversity of plant species to attract more birds.

Concentrate on Native Plants

- Emphasize native trees, shrubs, and vines. Native plants and birds have evolved side-by-side over thousands of years. Native plants are more likely to provide the right mix, size, and nutritional values that birds in our area require.
- By incorporating native habitats into our landscapes, we create natural corridors for birds to pass back and forth through their natural ranges. This is especially important for areas that have been impacted by development.
- Avoid exotic, invasive species. Some exotic species, like buckthorn or Japanese honeysuckle, provide abundant fruit for birds; however, they tend to crowd out native species over time, robbing birds and other animals of the diverse mix of plants needed for food and shelter.

Take a Cue from Nature

- Plant in drifts. If you look to nature, you'll discover that in the wild, plants usually occur in groups. This promotes cross-pollination, boosts fertility (and, therefore, fruit yield), and makes it easier for migrating birds to spot ripening fruits.

Northern Red Oak (*Quercus rubra*)

- Food Quality – Excellent
 - Cover – Fair
 - Mature height 50' and spread 30'
 - *Excellent fall color; acorn liked by numerous birds and animals*
- Season – Fall/Winter
Nesting - Fair



Swedish Whitebeam (*Sorbus intermedia*)

- Food Quality – Excellent
 - Cover – Good
 - Mature height 15' and spread 12'
 - *Creamy white flowers, showy bright orange berries in fall; hardy and tolerant of alkaline soils.*
- Season – Fall
Nesting - Good

SHRUBS

Four Wing Saltbush (*Atriplex canescens*)

- Food Quality – Good
 - Cover – Good
 - Mature height 5' and spread 5'
 - *Upright spreading habit; a four-winged fruit appears in late summer on female plants, may become rose-tinted in fall. Seeds eaten by birds. NATIVE*
- Season – Fall
Nesting - Good



Butterfly Bush (*Buddleia davidii*)

- Food Quality – Good
 - Cover – Good
 - Mature height 6' and spread 5'
 - *Tubular flowers are attractive to hummingbirds as well as butterflies; available in blue, pink, purple, red and white.*
- Season – Summer
Nesting - Good

Peking Cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster acutifolius*)

- Food Quality – Good
 - Cover – Excellent
 - Mature height 10' and spread 5'
 - *Fruit favored by Robins. Small pink blossoms turn to black fruit; orange-red fall color.*
- Season – Fall/Winter
Nesting - Good

Waxflower (*Jamesia americana*)

- Food Quality – Excellent
 - Cover – Good
 - Mature height 5' and spread 4'
 - *Intensely fragrant and showy clusters of waxy, white flowers. Attractive to bees and butterflies, seeds are favored by birds. NATIVE*
- Season – Fall
Nesting - Good



Boulder Raspberry (*Oreobatus deliciosus*)

- Food Quality – Good
 - Cover – Good
 - Mature height 6' and spread 6'
 - *Very hardy, tolerant of dry, sandy soils; arching growth habit. Fruit is eaten by a variety of wildlife.*
- NATIVE

Season –Summer/Fall

Nesting - Fair



Nanking Cherry (*Prunus tomentosa*)

- Food Quality – Good
- Cover – Good
- Mature height 10' and spread 10'
- *Showy, pink-white flowers and fine-flavored, red fruits that are favored by over 80 species of birds.*

Season –Summer

Nesting - Good

Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*)

- Food Quality – Good
 - Cover – Good
 - Mature height 25' and spread 20'
 - *Fruit is eaten by more than 70 bird species. Most common cultivar is Shubert's Chokecherry; aggressive growth habit!*
- NATIVE

Season – Summer

Nesting - Fair

Fragrant Sumac (*Rhus aromatica*)

- Food Quality – Fair
 - Cover – Good
 - Mature height 6' and spread 5'
 - *Excellent orange-red fall color, small red berries used by a variety of birds.*
- NATIVE

Season –Winter

Nesting - Good



Wood's Rose (*Rosa woodsii*)

- Food Quality – Excellent
 - Cover – Good
 - Mature height 4' and spread 4'
 - *Fast growing, suckers freely. Wildlife feeds on the rose hips.*
- NATIVE

Season –Fall/Spring

Nesting - Poor



Buffaloberry (*Shepherdia argentea*)

- Food Quality – Good
 - Cover – Good
 - Mature height 8' and spread 6'
 - *Robins, Sparrows, Red-Winged Blackbirds and many other birds usually eat the fruit when it is yellow or light orange in July and early August.*
- NATIVE

Season – Summer

Nesting - Good



Coralberry (*Symphoricarpos orbiculatus*)

- Food Quality – Good
 - Cover – Good
 - Mature height 4' and spread 6'
 - *Attractive in winter, full of fruit. This Colorado native is used by birds and small mammals.*
- NATIVE

Season –Fall/Winter

Nesting - Fair

Arrowwood (*Viburnum dentatum*)

- Food Quality – Good
- Cover – Good
- Mature height 12' and spread 9'
- *Fruit is eaten by songbirds; flat white flower clusters in June followed by blue-black berries; orange-red-purple fall color.*

Season – Fall/Winter
Nesting - Good



PERENNIALS

Hyssop (*Agastache* spp.)

- Food Quality – Good
- Cover – Fair
- Mature height 18 -36" and spread 14-30"
- *Attractive to hummingbirds. Many cultivars available, all with extraordinary scented foliage and blooms.*

Season –Summer - Fall
Nesting - Poor



Coreopsis (*Coreopsis* spp.)

- Food Quality – Good
- Cover – Fair
- Mature height 12 -30" and spread 12-18"

Season –Summer - Fall
Nesting - Poor



- *Attractive to hummingbirds; sparrows and finches also feed on the seeds. Many varieties to choose from in shades of yellow.*

Coneflower (*Echinacea* spp.)

- Food Quality – Good
- Cover – Fair
- Mature height 24 -36" and spread 18-24"

Season –Summer - Fall
Nesting - Poor



- *Attractive to hummingbirds; sparrows and finches also feed on the seeds. Available in lavender-purple and white with coppery centers.*

Blanket flower (*Gaillardia aristata*)

- Food Quality – Good
- Cover – Fair
- Mature height 14 -24" and spread 18-24"

Season –Fall
Nesting - Poor



- *Yellow to orange-yellow flowers; seeds are attractive to goldfinch and sparrows. NATIVE*

Coral Bells (*Heuchera* spp.)

- Food Quality – Good
- Cover – Fair
- Mature height 10 -18" and spread 12-18"

Season –Summer
Nesting - Poor

- *Attractive to hummingbirds; sparrows and finches also feed on the seeds. Multiple colors of flowers and foliage available.*

