

GARDENING TO ATTRACT BIRDS

Humans are not the only residents of Tucson. Many birds live here as well, even in the middle of town, brightening the city with their colors and songs. With just a little effort, we can attract them to our gardens. What we plant can make a difference in establishing corridors of habitat for both resident and migratory birds.

What do birds need for survival? No two species have exactly the same requirements, but like all wildlife they need food, water, and shelter. This basic formula will help in decisions about what to plant in a bird garden.

Different kinds of birds eat different kinds of food. Nectar-feeding birds such as hummingbirds are attracted to tubular flowers, often in the red/orange color range. Classic hummingbird flowers include ocotillo, betony, *Justicia*, *Zauschneria*, and various kinds of *Salvia* and *Penstemon*. Many birds, including mockingbirds and thrashers, choose fruits and berries when available. The conspicuous ripe fruits of prickly pear are very popular, and pyracantha, with its showy red-orange berries, is another good choice. Other species of birds, like quail, doves, sparrows, and finches, consume large quantities of seed. One good way to attract them is to put out birdseed. But a more natural way is to put out plants that produce favored seeds. Most members of the Sunflower Family are good producers of birdseed.

Insects may not be something you actively want to attract to your garden, but most songbirds eat insects at least part of the time. A healthy garden will have many insects. Besides butterflies, bees, and other pollinators at the flowers, there will be many tiny insects feeding on the stems and leaves. These insects rarely do any permanent damage to plants, and their numbers are kept partly in check by the birds. The use of pesticides probably will not get rid of all the insects, but it may get rid of the birds.

Traditional birdbaths with standing water can spread disease among birds. Daily scrubbing and cleaning of a birdbath may solve this problem, but a better method is to provide moving water, which prevents bacteria from forming.

Birds also need places for nesting, places to hide from predators, and shelter from the weather. As a general rule, one can attract more birds by planting trees and shrubs with firm, forked branches for nests, and dense foliage for cover. Too much neatness and tidiness may actually make your garden less attractive to our feathered friends. Leaf litter that accumulates under trees and shrubs attracts insects and birds, in addition to providing a fine mulch for your plants. Many gardeners have been taught to deadhead (cut off spent flowers) in order to encourage more bloom from their plants. Or they simply find the seed heads unsightly so they snip them off. If you cut off the seed heads, you are eliminating a popular food source for many birds. Don't deadhead, or at least do so in moderation.

Now the fun part! Relax in a patio chair with a cold (or hot) drink, a bird book handy, and a pair of binoculars. It may astonish you to see how many birds visit our backyard gardens. You'll see different birds in different seasons. Don't forget to check the telephone wires and telephone poles. Handsome (though boisterous) Gila woodpeckers won't give up on an old wooden telephone pole, and there are few sweeter sights than a pair of Inca doves tucked close together on top of a garden wall.

—Lynn Hassler Kaufman



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