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Planting a Garden for the Birds



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

© MAR 17, 2021 [bird-friendly gardens](#), [feed birds](#), [native plants](#)



Birds are the most welcome wildlife in the landscape garden. They are beautiful, musical, interesting to watch. Unlike deer and other large visitors that eat plants, birds can even protect your garden by eating harmful bugs. There are so many reasons to encourage birds to visit or even take up residence in your garden. Fortunately, welcoming birds to your yard is not hard. In fact, bird-friendly gardening often involves doing

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less work in the garden instead of more.

About Birdfeeders

[Birdfeeders](#) are the most obvious way to attract birds, and they can be very effective, especially for encouraging birds to spend time in spots that are convenient for birdwatching. But as anyone who has tried it knows, feeding the birds is a lot more complicated than just picking up a birdfeeder on a whim at the garden store.

Protecting your birdfeeder from squirrels and other critters is always a challenge. And filling the birdfeeder on a warm summer morning is a lot easier than trudging through the snow to fill it in midwinter — even though that’s when birds rely on our help the most. Many people don’t realize that bird feeders need more maintenance than just filling. An improperly maintained feeder can [spread disease](#).

Planting for the Birds

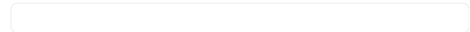
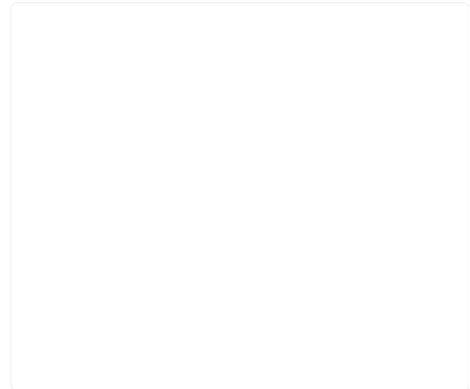
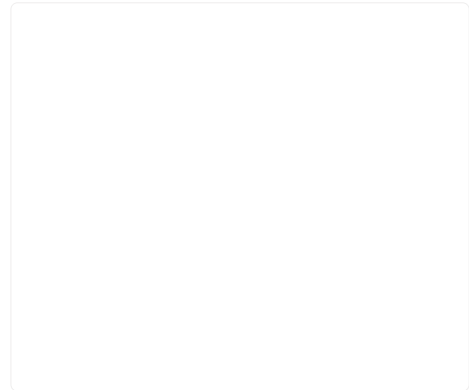
Whether you keep the birdfeeder or not, there is another way to attract birds to your yard that doesn’t require you to battle squirrels and snow. You can plant a garden for the birds. With a little planning, your spring planting can provide natural, healthy food for birds year-round.

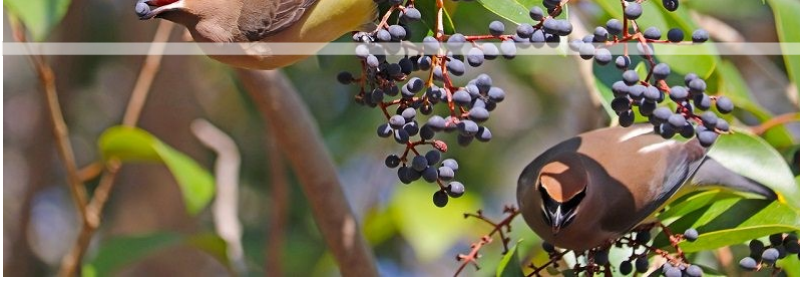
The most important characteristic of a bird-friendly garden is native plants. Depending on their species, birds may eat bugs, fruit, seeds, or nectar. While many horticultural varieties can attract insects and grow seeds, they won’t always match the specific nutritional needs of the birds that live in your area. Native plants have evolved alongside the birds and can provide all of these types of food in the way that works best for the birds. You can check with your [local Audubon Society chapter](#) or [native plant society](#) for advice on the best mix of regional plant varieties to support local bird populations. But a few native plants that work in [most regions](#) of the U.S. include coneflower, sunflowers, and milkweed. Don’t forget native trees — these can provide both food and shelter for your local birds.



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With a little planning, you can provide natural food for the birds year-round. Image by [GeorgeB2](#) from Pixabay

Bird-Friendly Gardening

When you are [landscaping for the birds](#), how you grow your garden is as important as what you grow. If you spray your garden with pesticides every time you see a bug, insect-eating birds will not find anything to eat in your yard. Pesticide residue on the plants could be [toxic](#) for fruit and seed-eating birds, too. You might have to adjust to a little more bug damage than you have been accustomed to tolerating. But who will notice a few chewed leaves when so many birds are hunting in your garden?

Along the same lines, birds do not have the same appreciation for a tidy garden that many humans do. If you skip the deadheading and leave leaf litter on the ground, the birds will have a lot more to eat; seedpods and overwintering bugs are perfect calorie-dense food sources for [birds in the winter](#).

Avian Amenities

Birds don't share our taste for neatness in the garden, but they do like a garden with multi-season interest. To make your garden appealing to the avian aesthetic, keep your plantings dense and multilayered with continuous blooming and a varied color palette. This provides cover and attracts a greater variety of tasty invertebrates and pollinators for seed production.

[Bird-friendly garden design](#) calls for certain amenities beyond plants. Birds need water just as much as mammals do. You can provide this with [birdbaths](#) or other water features, including ponds, reflecting pools, or even small puddles. A good mix of trees, a brush pile, and maybe even a snag will provide housing for a variety of species. But if your woody real estate is limited, consider installing some appropriately designed [birdhouses](#).



It's best to keep cats indoors, for their own safety and for the birds. Bell collars don't actually make a difference to your cat's ability to hunt birds. But if you can't keep your cat indoors, you can [reduce their predation](#) somewhat through diet and exercise.

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You don't have to [replace your entire landscape](#) to make your garden more bird-friendly. In fact, it makes a lot of sense to proceed slowly and observe which changes make the most difference. Books like [Gardening for the Birds: How to Create a Bird-Friendly Backyard](#) or regionally specific guides are helpful for deciding where to begin and how to proceed. The National Wildlife Federation's [Attracting Birds, Butterflies, and Other Backyard Wildlife](#) is another helpful resource. And when you've made enough progress, they can also recognize your backyard as [certified wildlife habitat](#).

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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