

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Contact: WSU/Skagit County Extension: 428-4270

Few things are as interesting and beautiful as songbirds in your garden. They brighten up the darkest days of winter, adding music and color to our lives. What can we do to repay these creatures? For starters, we can make our yards a bit more bird-friendly. Due to the expansion of urban areas, suitable habitats for birds are in short supply. The first step in designing a bird garden is to evaluate your yard. Does your yard provide the basic necessities- food, water, and shelter? Map your garden and decide where to locate flowerbeds, thickets, birdfeeders, and water features. It is important to plan your new “birdscape” in a style that suits you and your existing landscape. Plants native to your region are excellent for birds, because they are familiar and accepted as food sources, shelter, and nest sites. Native fruits and berries ripen on a schedule that coincides with natural needs at nesting and migration times or during winter months. You can create diversity by just making sure you have flowers, vines, shrubs, trees, and grasses that are attractive to birds. Some examples of flowers that attract birds are sedum, zinnia, purple coneflower, sunflower, elecampane, and cosmos. Wisteria vines are a haven for chickadees. Vines such as honeysuckle, trumpet vine, and cardinal flower provide hummingbirds with flower nectar, a major food source. Shrubs can work as “cover plants” from wind and produce food such as berries. Shrubs are a good place for birds to nest but need to have branches that can hold and support a nest. This requires a dense branching structure, not a loose, open one. One of the better times to get shrubs is in the fall when nurseries have them on sale. They are just about dormant for the winter so they transplant better. Some examples of “bird friendly” shrubs are pyracantha, elderberry, and snowberry.

Keep in mind that evergreens bear leaves throughout the year, offering year-round shelter, protection and breeding sites. Oaks produce acorns and serviceberry trees produce fruit. Try to create multiple layers of vegetation at about four different heights with your trees and shrubs. While trees are a must for any bird garden, you don't have to plant a towering forest to reap arboreal benefits. Even in small yards, petite trees like Japanese maples or dogwoods as well as dwarf cherry and plum trees can provide shelter and food. Use a variety of species with different flowering or fruiting periods to provide food throughout the year. Ground –frequenting birds like quail and juncos may prefer the low cover of ornamental grasses and turning over leaves in search of a succulent snack. Is this a good enough excuse not to rake the leaves? If you do decide to attract more birds into your yard, keep in mind that many herbicides, insecticides and fertilizers are deadly poisons. Although, not fully understood, dust bathing, is a favorite pastime for many bird species. Provide an area not less than three square feet and approximately six inches deep with an equal mixture of sand, loam, and sifted

wood ash. The sand in dust bath mixes is a wonderful source of grit needed for digestion of food in birds. There are issues that may arise when inviting birds into your garden. Some birds are fruit-eating, fish-eating and drummers. Many deterrents and ideas can be provided on these subjects through the internet, books, and by visiting a local wild bird store. The good however, outweighs the bad, with natural insect control and an ever-changing spectacle of melodious sound and lively color. While they are enjoying the amenities, treat yourself to a pair of binoculars, a tall cool drink and that ever-cozy hammock.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.