

Bugs in My Yard – Why that's a good thing

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The enjoyment of birds in your yard

A time of gathering

If you have ever gathered wild foods, like rose hips or nettles, you may have been surprised at how many insects you accidentally collected at the same time. These hangers-on suddenly appear on the counter-top or in the kitchen sink as you clean your harvest. Their great abundance on native fruits and leaves illustrates how these plants are interconnected with the animal world. Many of the bugs, like the tiny spiders, are harmless to the plant, just using it as a platform for their own foraging. Others, like aphids and caterpillars, may damage leaves. But all of them are very important to the birds using those plants.

Native plants are better for birds

Native plants are experiencing a heyday in popularity for a variety of reasons. They are adapted to our soils and climate, making them attractive to those wanting to help the environment and spend less time on fertilizing and watering. Native plants have co-evolved with our native pollinators, making them attractive to gardeners and farmers who need crops pollinated. Native plants are also important to the lesser known bugs out there, which in turn, are the mainstay for our birds.

Newly published research (*Biological Conservation* September 2017) affirms what we have suspected – native plants harbor more insects important to bird life than do non-native plants. This is not something you have to travel to a park to observe. You can witness it out your back door. Researchers compared caterpillar abundance on native and non-native plants, finding more caterpillars on the native species. They also tracked the behavior of chickadees and documented preferences for foraging and nesting on native plants. Many of us think our backyard songbirds depend on the seeds we put out for them. But these same birds rely heavily on insects for the calories needed to get through the cold months and to raise their young in the spring. Even Anna's Hummingbird, remarkable for expanding its winter range to include the Pacific Northwest, will feed on insects throughout the winter. If you enjoy seeing songbirds in your yard the best thing you can do is plant native species.

What about the bad bugs?

Insects do feed on our garden plants, damaging leaves in the process. But healthy plants can tolerate a little damage. And by making your yard hospitable to birds you are hosting your best ally when it comes to insect control. Chickadees, bushtits, hummingbirds and all sorts of warblers will glean insects from the most inaccessible places high in your trees, doing a more thorough job than any ground-based chemical application. By forgoing the use of pesticides and tolerating a little damage on some plants, you are attracting nature's own pest control service to your yard. And what a treat that it comes with beautiful songs.



A Chestnut-backed chickadee relies on bugs and insects for its year-round sustenance. *Photo by J.B. Smith.*

Are some native plants better than others?

The most important factors to consider when choosing native plant species are the conditions you have in your yard. Just as with cultivated species, native plants must be chosen with care to match culture requirements with site conditions. Many native species tolerate our wet winters and dry summers, yet consideration must still be taken when siting the plants relative to sun, shade, drainage and available space.

Choose both evergreen and deciduous species for your yard. Adding diversity will ensure that spiders and insects will be available for the birds much of the year. The Audubon Society has launched an initiative to encourage people to plant native species for the benefit of birds. A visit to the website www.audubon.org/native-plants/ will lead you to a list of plants appropriate for your area. Information about plants includes which species host caterpillars and which birds they are likely to attract. Refine your selection further by visiting the landscaping section of the Washington Native Plant Society website (www.wnps.org) for information about the culture requirements for each plant species. Be sure to consider the space you have available.

Once you have a plant species wish list, search your local nurseries, native plant society chapters and conservation district sales. The growing popularity of native plants has resulted in more being available in nurseries. Please support this trend by shopping in the local nurseries.

When you have your native plants established, the table is set. Sit back, listen and watch the birds enjoy the feast.

RESOURCES:

- Audubon. Native Plants Database. www.audubon.org/native-plants/
- Narango, Desiree L, Tallamy, Douglas W. and Marra, Peter P. *Biological Conservation* Sept. 2017, Vol 213. *Native plants improve breeding and foraging habitat for an insectivorous bird.*
- Tallamy, Douglas W. 2007. *Bringing Nature Home.*
- Washington Native Plant Society. www.wnps.org