



GARDENING FOR HUMMINGBIRDS

Why plant a garden for hummingbirds?

Hummingbirds are found only in the western hemisphere, with over 20 species in North America, three in eastern Washington. These tiny birds are unique in their speed, hovering ability, and iridescence. They serve as pollinators of many flowers which are specifically adapted to attract them and to discourage insects. Gardening to meet the needs of hummingbirds helps them to survive spring and fall migrations and to reproduce, by providing a continuous supply of nectar and insects, water, shelter, and nesting sites. A hummingbird-friendly garden is both beautiful and ecologically healthy.

Which hummingbird species can be found in the Spokane area?

Three hummingbird species migrate to the Spokane area each year. Characteristic markings are clear on male birds, while females show paler variations without the distinctive gorget (throat feathers) color. Strikingly beautiful gorget colors are the result of “iridescence,” not pigment color, and are visible only at the correct angle of the sun to the observer’s eye. At other angles, the gorget will appear black.

Black-chinned hummingbirds *Archilochus alexandri*

These birds arrive in March and leave by mid-August. Males arrive and leave about two weeks before females. The male bird has a distinctive black gorget (throat feathers) with a purple band below it.

Calliope hummingbirds *Stellula calliope*

This bird is the smallest bird in North America. Look for calliope to arrive in March and depart by late summer. The gorgets of male birds are striking, with rays of magenta feathers.

Rufous hummingbirds *Selasphorus rufus*

The rufous hummer arrives in our state from the end of February to April (mostly in March) and migrates south from August to September. This bird’s migration route is the longest of any hummingbird on our continent, from Mexico to its breeding grounds, which range from the Pacific Northwest to southern Alaska.

A very large moth resembles hummingbirds! It is called a sphinx moth, hawk moth, or hummingbird moth (genus *Hemaris*) and is active in the daytime (diurnal), unlike most other moths.

Visit our website at <https://extension.wsu.edu/spokane/master-gardener-program/home-lawn-and-garden/>
e-mail your garden questions to: mastergardener@spokanecounty.org

What do hummingbirds need to survive? What gardening practices support them?

To support the survival of hummingbirds in your area, provide these five basic elements: **food, water, shelter, natural perches, and nesting sites.**

Food

Hummingbirds consume flower nectar as a sugar source, small insects and spiders as sources of protein and fat. Native flowering plants attract insects that these birds catch as they seek nectar. Supplementation with hummingbird feeders can be helpful in attracting hummingbirds to your garden, especially early in the year as migrants are arriving. However, planting hummingbird-adapted flowers is much healthier for the birds, as nectar is rich in vitamins and minerals, unlike a sugar solution. (See below for helpful hints in using feeders.)

Water

Hummingbirds get most of their water from nectar. They like to bathe in sprinkler spray or even in the water on a leaf. Add flat rocks to a birdbath to vary the depth of water.

Shelter and natural perches

Areas of mixed shade and sunlight offer both a variety of flowering plants and protection from overheating. Hang feeders in shade or partial shade, as birds like to perch between visits to flowers or feeders. Overhanging twigs and tall flower stems serve as excellent perches. Artificial nectar will ferment if not changed every 2-4 days, especially in warm summer weather.

Nesting sites

Vary habitat within your garden to give female birds choices as where to build a nest. They use a variety of plant fibers, spider silk, and often lichens to build them.

Are pesticides dangerous to hummingbirds?

Both insecticides and herbicides are detrimental to hummingbirds. Insecticides directly kill one of the birds' major food sources. Nonselective herbicides can kill nectar plants or contaminate nectar that may be ingested by birds. An unhealthy habitat results when pesticides drift beyond their intended target, affecting an entire food chain.

What types of flowers attract hummingbirds?

The term “pollination syndromes” is often used to describe flower characteristics that typically attract a certain kind of pollinator. North American hummingbirds usually prefer warm-colored flowers (red, orange, and yellow) that are tubular in shape and hang singly or in loose clusters. These birds have long bills and long tongues, well adapted to this flower shape. Scents are not important to hummingbirds in locating flowers and many flowers they prefer are unscented.

Red flowers often produce large quantities of nectar, a learned association, but North American hummingbirds feed at almost any flower color. Most insects cannot see the color red, but hummingbirds can, which reduces competition for most hummingbird-adapted flowers. For a list of plants attractive to hummingbirds, consult “Hummingbird Friendly Plant List” publication C229.

Torpor and migration as survival mechanisms

These tiny birds can tolerate cold for only a few hours, so on cold nights may go into a state of torpor (“temporary hibernation”). In this state, they conserve energy and water, and may stop breathing for a time.

Most hummingbirds of North America migrate from Mexico each spring and return in the fall, using stores of body fat to make the journey possible. Migrating birds benefit from backyard feeders even after local birds have left. Refresh your feeder’s nectar well into the fall! It won’t cause them to delay their migration journeys.

Use of hummingbird feeders

Hummingbird feeders provide food sources before flowers are yet in bloom during migration periods. Birds who sip this artificial nectar also get nutrients from insects and flowers as they become available, so you don’t have to worry that you are feeding them a poor diet, if the nectar you provide is pure, refined sucrose (table sugar) and water. Never use artificial coloring, brown sugar, honey, molasses, or organic sugar. Natural nectar is made of sucrose, and this recipe provides the same sugar concentration as do most flowers. Do **not** add red dye.

Nectar recipe:

Ingredients

- Refined white sugar
- Water

Directions for making safe hummingbird food:

1. Mix 1 part sugar with 4 parts water (for example, 1 cup of sugar with 4 cups of water) shake until the sugar is dissolved
 - a. The warmer the water, the more easily the sugar will incorporate.
 - b. This mixture does not need to be boiled.
2. Fill your hummingbird feeders with the sugar water and place outside.
 - a. The most effective placement is near flowers and in an area with shrubs or tall flower stems offering thin perches.
 - b. Hang your feeders in the shade as much as possible.
3. Change and thoroughly clean feeders at least twice a week in hot weather (summer) and once a week in cooler weather (spring/fall) to prevent the growth of mold.
 - a. Clean feeders well with a mild vinegar solution;
 - b. Rinse out thoroughly with warm water before refilling with nectar.
4. Extra sugar water can be stored in a refrigerator for up to one week.

References

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