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Environmental Enhancement with Ornamental Plants: Attracting Birds

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Birds can be an important aspect of our backyard environment. In many cases, the quality of our environment is perceived to be directly related to the bird population. The bird population in your yard or neighborhood park can be increased year-round with the proper selection and arrangement of ornamental trees, shrubs and food-producing plants.

To attract and maintain a bird population, a habitat should provide (1) food, (2) cover, (3) nesting areas and (4) water. Ornamental trees and shrubs can supply the necessary cover (shelter) and nesting areas. Many ornamental plants can satisfy more than one habitat requirement. For example, multi-stem plants that form a dense canopy will satisfy the need for a nesting place and also provide cover.

As much as possible, trees and shrubs in your yard should provide birds a year-round food source. The use of native trees and shrubs will help ensure that appropriate fruits and berries are available for the local bird population. If the landscape does not supply food during certain periods, you can supplement with commercial bird seed mixes to help keep birds in the vicinity of your yard. Some birds eat a wide variety of seeds while others prefer only one or two types; however, sunflower seeds, proso millet seeds and peanut kernels appeal to the majority of birds.

If they are to become long-term residents, birds require a place of cover or shelter to protect them from inclement weather (sun, heat, wind and rain) and natural predators. This is why birds prefer multi-stem plants that form a dense canopy. The dense canopy also provides an ideal environment for nesting. Since birds require shelter year-round, your yard should have a mix of deciduous and evergreen plants. Evergreen plants include broadleaf evergreens, such as holly, and conifers, such as red cedar. Several references suggest that at least 25 percent of the trees and shrubs should be evergreen.

A source of fresh water is also necessary to maintain your bird population. The water source should be shallow (no more than 2 to 3 inches deep) and replaced on a regular basis. Running water, such as a shallow fountain, is ideal. The water source should be elevated or in the middle of an open area to minimize predation by cats and other animals.

On the next page is a list of recommended trees and shrubs to enhance the bird population. Attributes that must be considered before selecting the trees/shrubs for your yard include: (1) the habitat element provided, (2) fruiting season, (3) deciduous (loses leaves in winter) or evergreen, and (4) size of mature tree (to fit with available space).

Trees and Shrubs for Attracting Birds

| Southeastern Trees & Shrubs | Provides: | | Fruiting Season | Deciduous or Evergreen | Size (small, medium, large) |
|--------------------------------|-----------|------|-------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Cover | Food | | | |
| Beech | | X | Fall, winter | D | M |
| Black cherry | X | X | Summer | D | M |
| Black gum | X | X | Summer | D | L |
| Blueberry | X | X | Summer | D | S |
| Dogwood | X | X | Fall, winter | D | M |
| Elderberry | | X | Summer | D | S |
| Hawthorn | X | X | Spring | D | M |
| Holly | X | X | Winter, spring | E | M |
| Japanese yew | X | X | Summer, fall | E | M |
| Magnolia | X | X | Summer | E | L |
| Oaks | X | X | Fall | D | L |
| Pines | | X | Spring, summer, fall | E | L |
| Pyracantha | X | X | Fall, winter | E | S |
| Red cedar | X | X | Fall, winter | E | M |
| Red maple | X | | Spring | D | L |
| River birch | X | | Summer, fall | D | M |
| Sumac | | X | Fall, winter | D | M |
| Sweet gum | | X | Summer, fall | D | L |
| Viburnum | X | X | Winter | E | S |
| Wax myrtle | X | X | Summer, fall | E | M |

To make your landscape more suitable for birds, conduct an inventory of trees and shrubs and develop a table similar to the one above. From this list: a) determine the mix of evergreen and deciduous trees, b) look at the time of fruiting and identify season(s) without a food supply, and c) ensure that adequate cover and nesting habitat is provided. The following two examples describe possible situations in your yard and how to use the table:

- You have very few evergreen trees/shrubs (hence minimal shelter in the winter) but also have only small areas for additional plants. Select plants that are classified as evergreen (E) and are small at maturity. Red cedar, nandina, viburnum, pyracantha, Japanese yew, holly and wax myrtle are all relatively small trees.
- You need a food source for the spring but have limited yard area available. An excellent solution is to plant hawthorn, especially mayhaws, which are small multi-stem shrubs that bear fruit in the spring and attract a wide variety of birds.

In most instances, you will find that the addition of a few carefully selected plants can increase the bird population in your yard.

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