

## Attracting Birds to the Zone 4 Garden

The two fastest growing hobbies in North America are gardening and bird watching. Imagine combining both hobbies in your very own back yard through designing and planting a garden to attract these very special friends. To entice a variety of birds to your yard or garden, provide them with an oasis of everything they need to survive: food and water, shelter from weather and predators and a nesting place and materials. If you design your garden from a bird's perspective, they will come.



### The Birds

Many birds require different food sources - from insects to seeds; from fruit to nectar. Warblers, for example eat primarily insects while finches like seeds such as those found at bird feeders. Nectar eating birds include hummingbirds and orioles. Some will forage for seeds directly from the ground while others look for insects under fallen leaves in woodland areas. Most birds will eat two or three different types of food, but usually have a preference for one. For the safety of birds, avoid the use of pesticides.

### The Plan

The first step is to evaluate your space. Birds like to be in transition areas that provide food and water, shelter and nesting areas. If your property borders on a forest you are in a perfect area to develop a transition garden. However those on smaller properties require gardeners to visualize the transition area from a fence or wall where open space on the outer edge such as a lawn gradually gives way to mature shrubs closer to the fence or wall.



The images on the right shows the garden transitioning from lower perennials and annuals to shrubs and trees. Plan for a bird bath or water feature. Birds are especially attracted to moving water so consider suspending a plastic water bottle with a small hole in the end and allowing it to drip into the bird bath. Bird feeders around the garden, in the open but close to shelter, are another feature that should be considered, especially for winter sustenance.



### The Plants

**Fruit producing trees and shrubs** will attract birds year round with fragrant spring blooms to fall and winter berries. They also provide an environment for those insects that attract warblers and orioles. In general, shrubs can grow quite tall (1.2-2.4m; 4-8 feet), although there are some dwarf varieties of Viburnums and Rugosa. While many deciduous shrubs are hardy only to Zone 5, there are some attractive species for the gardens of Zone 4. Plants to consider are: Dogwoods, Viburnums, Rugosas, and Sumacs.

Birds are particularly fond of the Red Twig Dogwood (*Cornus albus*) whose dense thickets of branches provide shelter and food for flycatchers, kingbirds, catbirds, waxwings, woodpeckers and vireos in the spring and summer and succulent berries in fall and winter.



The red foliage in fall and red stems in winter contribute additional interest to the garden.

One of the great beauties of the autumn season is the Burning Bush (*Euonymus alata* 'Compactus'). It is distinguished by unusual corky "wings" which flare out along its branches as well as vibrant scarlet foliage and small red-orange fruit in the fall enticing cedar waxwings, cardinals, robins and brown thrashers. The plant grows 1.8-3 m (6-10 feet) high but there is a smaller variety, "Rudy Haag", growing only 1-1.5 m (3-5 feet) high and wide. This is a shrub that is best left unpruned although it can be pruned if you have space issues. It is not fussy about soil requirements (except for excessive wet areas), will grow in sun to part shade and there are no significant pest problems.



Oregon Grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*) is a wonderful addition to your shrub base. A broad-leaf evergreen, the fragrant yellow flowers in spring produce spectacular blue fruit that clings to the branches over winter. Both Blue and Grey Jays, waxwings, robins, redstarts and thrashers will forage for remaining fruit during fall migration and winter.



Shrubs should be planted at the back of the garden amidst evergreens such as junipers, spruces, and pines that are often preferred nesting sites for many birds. Conifers also offer warm shelter and protection from predators and food for house finches, crossbills and red-breasted nuthatches. If space is an issue consider a coniferous shrub such as Pfitzer Juniper (*Juniperus x pfitzeriana*). With a mature height of 6-8 feet this shrub delights robins, warblers and catbirds with superb nesting sites.



Deciduous trees such as a hardy hawthorn, with their exquisitely fragrant blooms in spring are a magnet for migrating warblers and in fall, cedar waxwings and robins eat the fruit. Be sure to check the zone as many Hawthorn cultivars are not hardy to Zone 4.



Whether grown on a fence or climbing a tree or trellis, Vines will add a dimension of height to your garden as well as provide shelter and nesting areas to our feathered friends. Vines that flower at different times of the year or have brightly coloured foliage in the fall will add interest in all seasons. Honeysuckle (*Lonicera x brownii* 'Dropmore' Scarlet) are a favourite of hummingbirds and robins will nest in a thick clump of Clematis. Indigo Buntings prefer to nest within a vine tangle such as Boston Ivy (*Parthenocissus tricuspidata*). Virginia Creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) provides winter food and spectacular colour beckoning thrushes, woodpeckers, vireos and warblers.



The final section of the transition garden that birds love include **Herbaceous Perennials, Grasses and Annuals**. They provide seeds for ground feeders such as sparrows and dark-eyed juncos as well as nesting materials for many birds. Some, such as Bee Balm, Bleeding Heart and Columbine will attract the nectar eaters - hummingbirds and orioles.

Grasses furnish sufficient shelter for finches and sparrows that prefer foraging in lower branches and also attract insects for warblers. Grasses also provide excellent nesting material and the tall grasses such as Flame Grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* var. *purpurascens*) lend themselves to planting near the back of the border with shorter grasses such as Blue Oat Grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*) as accents closer to the front of the garden.

Plant progressively from taller to lower species that bloom at a variety of times over the season to add more interest to the garden. Any perennial that produces seeds will provide food for cardinals, finches, indigo buntings, chipping sparrows, song sparrows and goldfinches. Some excellent Zone 4 perennials or annuals include spring flowering plants - Columbine, Bleeding Heart; early summer flowering plants - Coreopsis, Cosmos, Bee Balm, Daylily; mid-August to September - Purple Coneflower, Black-Eyed Susan and other Rudbeckia, Daisy, Phlox; Autumn flowering plants - Sedum, Asters; annuals for late spring to frost - Impatiens, Petunias and Zinnias.

In summary, some key points to remember:

- Birds require food and water, shelter and nesting areas. A few bird friendly seed-producing perennials and a bird bath are good starters, especially for common back yard birds (Finches, sparrows, woodpeckers, chickadees and nuthatches). Avoid the use of pesticides;
- Transition the garden from open areas and low growing plants such as annuals and some perennials to larger and taller perennials such as Black-Eyed Susan and Coneflower to even larger shrubs and trees;
- Choose plants that bloom at different times of year: Examples are Columbine and Bleeding Heart for spring, Bee Balm and Daisy for summer and Asters and Sedum for fall;
- Add winter interest and food sources by planting evergreen shrubs and trees, plants with interesting bark such as dogwood and burning bush and vines like Virginia Creeper;

You don't need to design a brand new garden - just add some of the above featured plants and a bird bath and you are well on your way to having birds in the garden.

Birds in the Garden - Janice Hardy  
Ontario Master Gardener Program

## Resources

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Fletcher Wildlife Garden, Ottawa, Ontario

<http://www.ofnc.ca/fletcher/howto/htbirds.php>

Landscape Ontario

<http://www.landscapeontario.com/>

Suite 101: On line magazine

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