

Bird Gardens



Gardening and bird-watching are popular past-times in Canada. Gardening for birds is the perfect way to blend these activities and contribute to a healthy environment. With a little research and planning, you can design a garden that provides birds with the essentials of life, and your family with backyard bird-watching fun.

Food

Birds eat a variety of seeds, nuts, fruit and nectar. Many native and ornamental plants produce these food items while also adding to the visual appeal of a garden. Allow birds the time to take full advantage of naturally occurring food sources by letting flowers go to seed. Sparrows, finches and other seed-eating birds feast on the seed heads of golden-rod, thistle and sunflower through late summer and fall. A selection of food-bearing native plants is included on page four of this fact sheet.

Some birds, including warblers, eat insects along with plant matter. Plant wildflowers that attract insects, and avoid chemicals. Most of the world's 750,000 known insects are harmless and some are even beneficial. Replace your chemicals with ecological knowledge.

Birds' diets change through the year as natural food sources come and go. Many birds eat insects in the summer when they are plentiful, but switch to seeds, nuts and other plant matter in the fall. Finding food during the colder months is a challenge for city birds. Gardeners can help by planting trees and shrubs that hold their seeds and berries into winter, such as Smooth Wild Rose and Staghorn Sumac.

Feeders

Another way to supply food for over-wintering birds is to install a feeder in early fall and to keep it clean and full until spring. Place feeders in a sheltered spot, ideally close to a window so you can watch the birds come and go. Hawk silhouettes, streamers or window coverings may be required to prevent birds from flying into windows.

Project Feeder Watch is a winter survey of birds visiting backyard feeders in North America. The information collected helps ornithologists track changes in the numbers and locations of bird species. To participate or find out more about this program, visit the project's website listed in Additional Resources.

Water

Water is an essential part of a bird garden, both for drinking and bathing. Place a birdbath or waterbowl in a sheltered area. Change the water twice a week to prevent standing water that can lead to mosquitoes. Consider installing a fountain, as the sound of running water will attract more birds than still water. Remember, birds require water in the winter as well.



Nesting sites and shelter

Birds need places to build nests and raise young. Some birds, like the introduced House Sparrow and European Starling, will nest almost anywhere. But many of our native species have more specific nesting requirements. The greater the number of habitat types in your yard or neighbourhood, the greater the diversity of nesting birds. While a meadow garden will attract American Goldfinches, a woodland garden will attract American Robins and Red-eyed Vireos.

Gardeners can provide nesting sites and shelter for a variety of birds by taking care of existing trees, shrubs and vines, and by planting additional ones if space permits. Mature Silver Maple trees are ideal for cavity-nesting birds, as their wood softens with age. Conifers are also valuable for year-round cover.

Allow dead trees in your yard to remain standing, as long as they do not pose a danger to people and property. These trees (snags) provide nesting opportunities for Downy Woodpeckers, Tree Swallows and Nuthatches. Cavities also provide roosting areas for Winter Wrens, Kinglets and Chickadees looking to escape winter's chill. Groupings of evergreens, dense shrub beds and brush piles provide both excellent winter shelter and summer hiding spots. Create a brush pile in your yard using fallen branches and old Christmas trees.

If your neighbourhood lacks naturally occurring nesting sites and shelter, install nesting boxes of various sizes and designs. Different species have different preferences, so do some research beforehand. There are several features to consider when purchasing or building a nesting box. Including the size of the entrance hole, direction the box is facing, height of the box and surrounding habitat.

Nesting boxes should be constructed of natural untreated wood. Walls should be at least two centimetres thick to provide insulation. Also include holes for ventilation and drainage. Ornamental boxes often have outside perches. These are not recommended for functional boxes because they allow predators to access eggs and young inside.

For more information on the proper construction, placement and maintenance of nesting boxes, visit the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Canadian Wildlife Federation websites listed in Additional Resources.

Other considerations

Birds help gardeners in many ways. These include the pollination of flowers and control of insects. To protect these garden allies, avoid chemical pesticides and use botanical products sparingly. Chemical lawn fertilizers should also be avoided. They reduce soil insect and worm populations, which are food sources for many birds.

Cats kill millions of songbirds every year in Canada. They are partially to blame for the near extinction of certain species, including the Prothonotary Warbler. Keep cats indoors or on leash while out-of-doors to reduce bird mortality, especially during peak songbird migration periods (e.g., May and September-October). At a minimum, do not install bird feeders or baths if cats frequent your yard.

Common backyard birds

The number and types of birds in a yard are dependent on landscape type, maintenance practices and closeness to natural features. More birds will frequent yards with more natural landscapes containing native plants, and those near woodlots, meadows or water bodies. This is especially true during spring and fall when migrants stop by to rest and refuel. The following list contains some common backyard birds in the Greater Toronto Area.

American Goldfinch (*Carduelis tristis*)

This 11 centimetre long, yellow-and-black bird flies in a wavy pattern and chirps almost constantly. It consumes the seeds of thistle, sunflower and dandelion, and visits feeders with niger or sunflower seeds, millet or nuts.

American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*)

This 25 centimetre long, orange-breasted bird eats earthworms and insects through the summer, and berries from Buckthorn, Mountain Ash and Staghorn Sumac in colder weather. The robin's sweet song is often the first to be heard at dawn and the last to be heard at dusk.

Black-capped Chickadee (*Parus atricapillus*)

This 12-15 centimetre long, friendly and energetic bird is easy to recognize by its black cap and bib and its 'chick-a-dee-dee-dee' song. During the summer, chickadees feast on spiders and insects, including moths, caterpillars, flies and leafhoppers. In colder months, they consume berries and the seeds of conifers and weeds that are left standing. Chickadees also visit feeders with sunflower seeds, suet, peanuts and peanut butter, and sometimes even take seed from hands.

Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*)

This 30 centimetre long bird has blue wings with white on the tips of both wings and tail. It is easily distinguished by its loud squeaks and aggressive behaviour. Blue Jays will eat insects, fruit, nuts, acorns and even other birds' eggs if food is scarce. They readily eat sunflower seeds, corn or nuts from open-tray feeders and also enjoy suet.

Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*)

This 15-18 centimetre long bird has a broad white stripe down its black back, a white breast and flanks, and black-and-white checkered wings. The male also has a small scarlet patch at the back of its black crown. It consumes the insects under bark, as well as suet and sunflower seeds from feeders.

Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*)

This 22 centimetre long bird's scarlet feathers and lovely song make it instantly recognizable. The cardinal prefers brushy areas and seeks the privacy of evergreens, thorny thickets and dense tangles of vines. It consumes insects, spiders, seeds and berries found in the wild, and black-oil sunflower seeds, peanuts or dried fruit in feeders.

Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*)

This 14-16 centimetre long bird has reddish-brown streaked plumage and a sweet song. The song sparrow has a diversified palate but especially enjoys sunflower seeds, millet or cracked corn. It frequents unkept areas with abundant weeds and grasses that have gone to seed, and is especially helpful in the garden, eating ants, beetles, caterpillars and grasshoppers.

White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*)

This 12-14 centimetre long bird has a white face and underparts, and blue-grey upperparts. This nuthatch is often seen hopping down a tree headfirst in search of ants, scale, beetles, caterpillars and insect eggs. During the winter, it visits feeders with suet, sunflower seeds and peanuts. But in the summer, its diet consists exclusively of insects.

Native plants for your bird garden

Native plants of southern Ontario are plants that were here for thousands of years before European settlement. This vegetation evolved along with native wildlife and insects to adapt to climate and soil conditions found across the region. The native plants listed below provide food, nesting and/or shelter for birds.

Deciduous trees and shrubs

- Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*)
- Choke Cherry (*Prunus virginiana*)
- Common Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*)
- Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*)
- Nannyberry (*Viburnum lentago*)
- Paper Birch (*Betula papyrifera*)
- Red Osier Dogwood (*Cornus sericea*)
- Serviceberry (*Amelanchier spp.*)
- Silver Maple (*Acer saccharinum*)
- Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*)
- White Oak (*Quercus alba*)
- Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*)

Herbaceous plants

- Big Bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*)
- Bee Balm (*Monarda didyma*)
- New England Aster (*Symphotrichum novae-angliae*)
- Sunflower (*Helianthus spp.*)

Conifers

- Common Juniper (*Juniperus communis*)
- Balsam Fir (*Abies balsamea*)

Vines

- Virgin's Bower (*Clematis virginiana*)
- Wild Grape (*Vitis spp.*)
- Virginia Creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*)

If possible, include layers of vegetation in your garden—tall and short trees, shrubs, wildflowers and groundcovers—that copy natural landscapes and increase the available space for birds.

Additional resources

- Canadian Wildlife Federation - Wild about Gardening www.wildaboutgardening.org
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse
- Evergreen Native Plant Database www.evergreen.ca
- FLAP (Fatal Light Awareness Program) www.flap.org
- Ontario Nature www.ontarionature.org
- Project CHIRP www.projectchirp.com
- Project FeederWatch and Bird Studies Canada www.bsc-eoc.org/volunteer/pfw/
- Stokes Backyard Nature Books www.stokesbooks.com

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