

Showy Berries for the Winter

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One of the most noticeable plants in San Antonio winter landscapes is pyracantha. The red and orange berries are showy from now until late winter when the birds will eat them. In addition, they have attractive white blooms in the spring, can be pruned to any desired shape including espalier, provide valuable wildlife cover, and can be used for protective hedging because of their thorns. Among the bird species that eat pyracantha are mockingbirds, cardinals, blue jays, woodpeckers house finches and thrashers. One January, as Dr Parsons and I were broadcasting our radio show, Gardening South Texas from the porch at Milbergers Nursery, a flock of several hundred cedar waxwings flew into the nursery during a pyracantha promotion and stripped every one of the 30 plants on display of their berries. It was a great testimonial of the appeal to birds of the berries of this remarkable plant.

As attractive and valuable as pyracantha is to wildlife, the plant is an exotic species introduced from Asia and Europe that can be invasive in some situations.

Most of the roses we use in San Antonio landscapes are valuable as cover for birds when they are allowed to grow without excessive pruning but very few provide food in the form of rose hips. One exception is the Katy Road (Carefree Beauty pink). It has a long bloom period and from summer through the winter produces one inch in diameter rose hips available for the birds and other wildlife. Katy Road shrubs only grow to about 7 feet tall and 6 feet in diameter, but the plant is relatively compact and like all the tough modern and old-fashioned roses does not require pesticide spraying to protect it from insects and disease. That means that in addition to the hips, the plant can be used as a nest site and the insects that visit the plants can be consumed by the birds.

Standard yaupon holly is also decorating Central Texas landscapes with its berries. Individual yaupon holly plants are either male or female with the berries borne on the females. There are plenty of males in the environment to pollinate the berries. Nurseries usually only sell the females. The berries are smaller than pyracantha berries, but the native evergreen plant can grow to 25 feet tall. Yaupon holly shares some of the flexibility of pyracantha in responding to pruning and is commonly pruned into many shapes. The plant will grow in sun or shade. Yaupon holly does not have thorns, so it is easier to use in some landscaping situations than pyracantha. The growth pattern however is dense, however, so it is a favorite nesting site for birds.

Another shrub with showy berries is the standard nandina. The plants only grow to 7 feet tall and can prosper in sun or shade. Nandinas in the sun have colorful winter foliage in addition to the berries. Nandina berries seem to be less tasty to birds than the other plants described in this article. Expect them to be eaten at the end of the winter after all the tastier berries have been consumed.

Japanese Ligustrum (privet) is a fast-growing evergreen plant that produces large quantities of blue berries that are eaten by the birds every winter. It grows to 20 feet tall and is used for tall hedges, but it is most known as a notorious invasive plant. In my neighborhood the most prevalent feeder on Ligustrum berries are cedar waxwings. Flocks of several hundred will move in unison from tree to tree to eat the small but plentiful berries. Because of the extreme invasiveness of the Ligustrum, limit its presence in your landscape despite its attractiveness to birds as a winter food source.

Based on the time of the year it is appropriate to discuss mistletoe berries. Mistletoe berries are not as showy as the berries as the shrubs described in this article, but they are well known as a Holiday decoration and surprisingly, they are a favorite wildlife food despite being poisonous to humans, dogs, and cats. The parasitic plant penetrates the vascular system of mesquites and other tree species to produce the white berries that are eaten by thrashers, cedar waxwings, mockingbirds and other species. Even deer will eat the berries. The birds that consume the berries excrete the seeds on other horizontal branches that often-become new mistletoe sites.