**Fall Hummingbirds**

**Calvin Finch Ph.D.**

Horticulturist and Director

Texas A&M Water Conservation and Technology Center

If you are interested in hummingbirds this is one of the best times of the year. The young of the year and fall migrants are moving about throughout the area so they are especially easy to attract to your patio or balcony with a combination of sugar water and their favorite nectar plants.

Hummingbird feeders are available for sale at many retail outlets including feed stores, hardware stores, nurseries and supermarkets in addition to bird specialty stores such as Wild Bird Unlimited.

The feeders can resemble works of art with elaborate shapes and colors of glass but they also need to be functional. You want your feeder to hold a week’s supply of sugar water (about one quart) and you need to be able to clean it easily. Sugar water in our heat is prone to grow mold and/or evaporate so you need to rinse and refill the feeder every week.

Every month the feeder should be cleaned more thoroughly with a brush. Bottle brushes are usually for sale at the same retailers as feeders.

My favorite feeders are those manufactured by Best -1 in Poteet and Perky Pet.

The Best -1 feeder uses a quart jar as a reservoir to supply a round base with small holes from which the hummingbirds feed. The configuration does a good job of discouraging ants and slows down consumption by golden-fronted woodpeckers which compete with the hummingbirds

The Perky Pet feeder has a wide-mouthed plastic reservoir for easy cleaning and refilling. It relies on plastic flowers for bee guards. Golden-fronted woodpeckers that have learned to eat the sugar water like Perky Pet feeders because they can take deep draughts of the sweet liquid.

Whatever feeder you choose, mix the sugar water at four parts water to one part sugar. Boiling the water in the microwave makes the sugar dissolve easily and some sources claim it contributes to protecting hummingbird health but I am not aware of any research results that justify the effort.

Hang the feeder on a trellis or the eaves of your house at a location that is easy to view from the window or from your patio chairs.

Beginning in September and running through October you can expect to see three species of hummingbirds in Central Texas: black-chinned, ruby-throated and rufous.

The birds will compete for a place on a feeder. Hummingbird dogfights are exciting to witness. Your children and grandchildren will find them especially entertaining.

To increase the number of hummingbirds you can accommodate, have more than one feeder. You can also increase the number of birds that visit your patio by obtaining several hummingbird nectar source plants in containers.

My favorite hummingbird plant is firebush (*Hamelia patens)*. In the container it has a round crown with reddish foliage that is covered with red tubular dime-size flowers from now until cold weather arrives. The toughest hummingbird on site will take charge of the firebush.

Firebush is a sun-loving plant; pentas are shade tolerant and are nearly as attractive to hummingbirds as firebush. There is a choice of red, lavender, pink, and white blooms. Buy pentas or firebush in black plastic containers and just slip them in a fancier container for an instant hummingbird nectar source and showy patio plant.

Other hummingbird nectar plants for the fall are *Salvia greggii*, cape honeysuckle, the blue salvias, hibiscus and zinnias.

After the hummingbird action ends this fall, firebush can be left in a container or they can be planted in the shrub border. In a three-gallon container they grow to a globe-shaped plant about 2.5 feet tall and wide. In the soil they will grow to five or six feet tall.

Firebush freeze back to the ground every winter and re-emerge in late April.

Pentas are tropical plants. They can be overwintered in the greenhouse or just replaced in the spring. In addition to being a favorite hummingbird plant, pentas are very attractive to butterflies.

Black-chinned hummingbirds are the resident breeding species in San Antonio and to the south and west of the city.

Ruby-throated hummingbirds breed in East Texas, throughout the eastern United States and into Canada.

Rufous hummingbirds are the smallest of the three fall hummingbirds. The small size does not mean they are pushed around by the other two species, however. In my experience, the rufous hummingbirds are the toughest in competition for the best sugar water feeder and nectar plants.

Rufous hummingbirds have a red brown back and sides. They are a Western species and individuals will often stay in area landscapes into January.