

## Birds are Feasting

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The birds are nesting; fruits, seeds and insects are necessary if the area species are going to successfully raise their young. If you have plenty of foliage, blooms, and thickets the insects will be available. Some of you who grow tomatoes, peaches, figs and blackberries are probably somewhat unhappy that the birds which eat fruits seem to be helping themselves to a good share of your crops!

In addition to the garden produce, birds seek out landscape plants that produce fruit and seeds. One of their favorite plants is anaqua, a native evergreen tree that provides a bountiful yield of yellow/orange berries every May. The tree I am familiar with is alive with mockingbirds, cardinals, woodpeckers, house finches, and English sparrows. Anaqua has a dense dark green crown and produces a showy white bloom in March. In addition to being an attractive part of the landscape, anaqua is a favorite nesting site for birds.

Anaqua is also called sandpaper tree because of the rough-textured leaves. It will grow to over 30 feet tall on good soils, but survives as a short dense shrub even on dry rocky hillsides. During the winter of 2018 most anaquas in San Antonio dropped their leaves in the cold but that is not usual. Anaquas are available at some area nurseries.

As attractive as anaqua is as landscape plant and source of bird habitat, it has several characteristics to be aware of. The berries that the birds love are "sticky". Bonsai Master and former shopkeeper at La Villita, Sherri Disdier, reminded me of this issue because the shopkeepers of La Villita had to try and clean up the berries tracked into their shops from the anaquas in the courtyard every year! Anaquas are not fast growers and will also send up root sprouts from the parent tree in some soil situations.

Texas persimmon is another small native tree that serves as an attractive landscape plant and is a favored source of fruit for the birds. The fruit is considerably larger than anaqua berries, so it is not eaten whole. The cardinals, blue jays, mockingbirds, thrashers and especially the golden-fronted woodpeckers rip the quarter-size fruit apart to secure bite-size segments.

The species grows to 20 feet tall in a typical SA soil. In full sun it has an attractive rounded shape with small leathery leaves and distinctive smooth gray bark. The sexes are on separate trees for Texas persimmon so if you find a source of transplants at a native plant sale purchase several to make sure you obtain at least one female.

The last food source for birds that I want to discuss today is the annual sunflower. Several species of the plant are blooming now and already have started maturing seed. A stand of *Helianthus annuus* is one of the best places to observe the colorful lesser goldfinches. They also attract cardinals, Inca doves, white-winged doves, house finches, titmice, and chickadees.

The seed of *Helianthus annuus* is available on the internet and at some of the seed racks at area nurseries. Another way to obtain the seed to start your own stand of native sunflower is to collect a few mature flower heads from a stand at an accommodating neighbor or roadside ditch. Spread the seed onto bare soil in full sun and you will soon have a stand of the 7 feet tall bloom and seed producers. The native sunflowers are not a disciplined grower so don't hesitate to limit the stand to an appropriate area.

In addition to the sunflower seeds, a stand of annual sunflowers will produce attractive 3-inch blooms that are decorative and a good source of nectar for butterflies and hummingbirds. At least one species of butterflies, the bordered patch, favors the young sunflower plants as an egg-laying site. At times they can be so thick that they strip the plants of foliage, but don't worry, they will recover and go on to produce the desired blooms and seeds.