**Weekly Express-News Article**

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**“Planting to Attract Birds”**

We have more species of birds in Texas than any other state in the US, and many of them can be seen in Central Texas. You can attract many to your own landscape by having plants that provide cover and food. As gardeners in San Antonio, we make much of the fact that we can have 12 months of low-water-use color and 12 months of vegetable production from our landscapes. It is also possible and desirable to have 12 months of food production for birds.

If you are willing to simplify a complex, interrelated situation, the bird species that are likely to visit our landscapes can be divided into four main groups based on their food choices. There are nectar sippers, largely hummingbirds; there are seedeaters such as goldfinches, cardinals, titmice, sparrows, doves, and chickadees; and there are insect eaters such as wrens, woodpeckers, and warblers. Orioles and cedar waxwings are largely fruit eaters but many species will partake in fruit if it is available in the landscape.

Provide 12 months of insect offerings to birds by having a diverse mix of plants. Select plants from each category of size including groundcovers, perennials, small shrubs, large shrubs, small trees, and shade trees. Some should be evergreen and a good portion should be planted in thickets. A massed planting of old fashioned or tough modern roses can count as a thicket that will provide insects and also be an attractive landscape feature. So will a planting of dwarf Chinese holly or a hedge of viburnums.

Nesting opportunity is not the topic of this article, but thickets of all sizes also serve that purpose. Thickets can also include blooms, fruit, or seed producing plants.

Hummingbirds are largely in our area from March through November. To provide good nectar during the period consider cross vine, Salvia greggii, Mexican honeysuckle, Mexican bush sage, esperanza, firebush, poinciana, and cape honeysuckle in the sun. For the shade Texas gold columbine, Salvia coccinea, dwarf ruellia, pentas, and firespike will bring them in for easy observation.

To attract the fruit eaters begin the year with yaupon holly, pyracantha, ligustrum, and hackberries. Mulberries just ripened their fruit. The trees are alive with the fruit eating buds but also attract cardinals, doves, woodpeckers, and house finches. Mulberries, hackberries, and ligustrum are not highly rated landscape plants, but if you can find them a corner in the landscape, the birds they attract through the year will help you overlook the less desirable characteristics. Viburnums provide spring berries and will grow in the shade. Blackberries and figs are bountiful producers. You may be willing to share some of the fruit with the birds.

Chinese pistache is as popular for fall fruit as mulberry is in the spring, plus it makes a good shade tree with attractive fall color.

Include an anaqua in your landscape for its attractive evergreen foliage and the berries that it produces. Other native plants that produce berries include Texas persimmon (female plants), brasil, Mexican plum and agarita. Preserve the ones you have and watch for plants at native plant sales such as the Mitchell Lake Fall Festival.

One of the most popular seeds with birds is sunflower. They have started to bloom now and will begin maturing seed in about three weeks. Plant sunflower seed near your bird feeder in a row in the garden and/or let some of those that drop from the feeder grow to full size. There are also several colors and sizes of sunflowers that can be grown in the cut-flower garden as an ornamental with a few left to attract the seed eating birds.

For a special experience, plant a patch of Maximilian sunflower seeds in full sun where you can observe them. They grow to seven or eight feet and are not disciplined growers, so may not fit in a manicured landscape but the result can be very spectacular once the seed begins to mature. The seedeaters in your neighborhood will find them. The lesser goldfinches and cardinals are especially attracted but expect chickadees, house finches, buntings, and even woodpeckers to harvest their share.

Herb gardeners will have the same experience but on a smaller scale if you allow your basil to go to seed. The birds in my yard move up on the patio to get their share. Coneflowers and zinnias will also attract birds to harvest the seeds from the spent flowers.

Oaks and pecans provide shade in many landscapes and the acorns and nuts they produce are a major diet item for squirrels and deer. Larger seed eating birds including blue jays and woodpeckers may be able to access whole acorns or pecans but lots of other birds feast on the nuts that fall to the road or driveway to be crushed by vehicles or even walkers.

If you would like to increase the bird numbers in your landscape, make an assessment of the year-round availability of food for the birds in the various categories in your yard and fill the gaps with new plantings.