Maximizing Hummingbird Action

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If you have zinnia, salvia, lantana and other types of blooms in your landscape you are probably seeing at least one black-chinned hummingbird collecting nectar every day. As neat as that is, you can increase the number of hummingbird species and individuals several times if you add a few container plants and sugar-water feeders.

The hummingbird migration period begins in September so there will be waves of ruby-throated and rufous hummingbirds moving through San Antonio in addition to black-chins. With a few attractants to your patio the migrants will settle in for a few days or even weeks to take advantage of the food sources.

One of the most effective food sources is a firebush in a container. Nurseries have blooming specimens of firebush available in 1 gallon and 3 gallon containers. Place one or more of the plants directly on the patio and they will become the center of entertaining hummingbird dogfights as waves of migrants move through. The toughest hummingbird dominates the firebush. On my patio that is usually a rufous hummingbird. They are small but dominating.

Firebush are sun-loving plants. After you use them to attract hummingbirds on the patio this autumn, they can be planted in the landscape or left in a container. They grow to 6or 7 feet in the soil but stay at a disciplined 3 feet globe in a 3 to 5 gallon container. When the cold weather arrives the foliage turns purplish and they eventually die back to the roots. Next year in April they resprout with attractive red foliage.

If your patio is shady, consider pentas or firespike as your special autumn hummingbird attracting container plant.

There are a number of hummingbird feeders available on the market. I use Best 1 and Perky Pet feeders because they are easy to use and to clean. Best 1 is manufactured in Poteet!

Place a hook on your eaves or a trellis at a point where you can observe the action from your patio chairs or the kitchen window. Mix one part sugar with 4 parts water by volume to fill the feeders. It is convenient to mix the sugar water up in 1 gallon batches stored in plastic milk jugs in the refrigerator. The feeders will usually need to be rinsed and refilled every week. Once per month clean them thoroughly with a bottle brush.

Many gardeners who feed hummingbirds add red food coloring to the mix. It was believed that the red sugar water was more attractive to the birds than a clear solution. Although there is no definitive research results that indicate the food coloring hurts the hummingbirds, it does not seem to be necessary to attract the birds. The curious hummingbirds check out the red feeders and find the sugar water whether it is red or clear.

There is research, however, that indicates that our feeders do not change the migration plans of the hummingbirds. You can be comfortable providing the sugar water through November at least. It is also not unusual for one or more of the independent rufous hummingbirds to stay in your neighborhood deep into the winter as long as the weather is mild. He/she will appreciate having a source of sugar water as long as they decide to stay!

If the fall hummingbird action interests you and you want to compare your results with other gardeners in San Antonio, tune into Milberger’s Gardening South Texas on KLUP 9:30 on the AM dial between noon and 2pm every Saturday and Sunday, it is one of the main topics of discussion through the autumn.