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Garden Talk Birds love a garden with water, and plants that provide food and shelter

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For The Birmingham News

Q: Can you give me information on the best ways to attract birds in my yard?

A: I was just reading the other day and came across something I did not realize. Bird-watching is the second-biggest hobby in the United States. It was second to - you guessed it - gardening. What better way to enjoy the outdoors than to combine your two favorite hobbies?

To attract birds to your yard, you must think like a bird. Is there shelter, food, and water? (At least I think that's what I would be looking for if I were a bird. Maybe I should add a girlfriend, which would be nice, too.)

Building a backyard habitat for birds can be both fun and easy to achieve, especially if you are a gardener. Plants are the most important element in creating a great habitat for your favorite birds. You need to choose those that can be a source of food or shelter or both. Shrubs that produce berries work great for food. Cone-bearing evergreens are fantastic for both food and shelter.

Selecting plants that bear fruit at different times of the year is also important. Plants like blackberries and viburnums bear fruit in the summer, while pyracanthas and hawthorns give the birds something for the fall.

In order to enjoy watching the birds, you need to be sure the plants will be visible from the window or outdoor sitting area that you use most often. This is important because most of the activity will occur in and around the plants.

"Layering" your landscape is a good way to create an oasis near your window or sitting area which brings the birds closer into view. Layering simply means placing the taller plants to the rear of your backyard habitat, typically far away from your house. The shrubs or medium size plants should be planted in the middle and your perennial and annual flowering plants should be placed in the foreground.

This method allows the birds cover to feed safely but yet feel comfortable if danger is near. Evergreen shrubs like hollies and junipers can provide shelter. Deciduous shrubs can also provide protection for the birds as well as good nesting areas. Vines are also important when selecting your bird-loving plants. They can provide both a nesting area and a food source. Ivy and honeysuckle are good examples of bird-loving vines.

Besides food and shelter, birds need a place to drink and bathe. Something as simple as a bowl of water will provide just what they need. They are attracted to the sound of water, so a fountain that has moving water will cause a bird to stop and see what they may be missing. Bird baths, pools or ponds are great spots for birds to bathe.

Make sure to keep plant material away from the water's edge as this provides a great hiding place for cats and other predators. They need to be near shrubbery that is within a short flight to protection.

As you can see, with proper planning, you can have a backyard habitat for birds of all kinds. Before you know it, you will become an avid backyard birder and a gardener, too.

Garden Talk is written by David Hubbard, Birmingham metro horticulture agent for the Jefferson County Extension office. Call him at 879-6964, ext. 17, or mail questions to 2612 Lane Park Road, Birmingham, AL 35223.

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