

# Gardening for the Birds

Birds are a joy to watch. And there are plenty of them to watch. **In Johnson County alone, 325 bird species** have been observed in recent years according to records compiled by the Kansas Ornithological Society, Kansas Breeding Bird Atlas Project and the Kansas Biological Survey.

It's fun and easy to create a bird haven in your backyard garden. Just offer four essential elements — food, water, shelter and nesting sites — and you'll soon have beautiful birds adding color and music to your garden year round.

“My favorite weather is  
bird-chirping weather.”

—Loire Hartwoud

## Food

To attract a wide variety of bird species, offer a smorgasbord of plantings.

**Trees.** Many trees produce fruit or seed that birds like to eat. Bird favorites include:

- Birch (*Betula*)
- Cherry (*Prunus*)
- Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*)
- Crabapples (*Malus*)
- Dogwoods (*Cornus*)
- Elm (*Ulmus*)
- Japanese Maple (*Acer palmatum*)
- Maple (*Acer*)
- Mulberries (*Morus*)
- White Oak (*Quercus alba*)
- Purple Leaf Plum (*Prunus cerasifera*)
- Redbud (*Cercis canadensis*)
- Serviceberries (*Amelanchier*)

**Evergreens.** Evergreens provide birds with fruits, seeds, needles and cones. Bird favorites include:

- Eastern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*)
- Spruces (*Picea*)
- Pines (*Pinus*)

**Shrubs and vines.** Shrubs and vines provide berries and fruit. Good choices include:

- American Bittersweet vine (*Celastrus scandens*)
- Barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*)
- Beautyberry (*Callicarpa*)
- Blueberry (*Vaccinium*)
- Coralberry (*Symphoricarpos orbiculatus*)
- Euonymous (*Euonymous*)
- Holly (*Ilex*)
- Honeysuckle (*Lonicera*)
- Viburnums (*Viburnum*)
- Virginia Creeper vine (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*)
- Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*)
- Wild Grape Vine (*Vitis*)
- Witchhazel (*Hamamelis*)

**Flowers.** Many flowers set seed for birds. Good choices include:

#### Annuals

- Sunflower (annual) (*Helianthus annuus*)
- Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*)
- Lemon bergamot (*Monarda*)
- Mexican sunflower (*Tithonia*)
- Nasturtium (*Tropaeolum*)
- Tickseed (*Coreopsis tinctoria*)
- Zinnia\* (*Zinnia angustifolia*)

#### Perennials

- Anise hyssop (*Agastache*)
- Blanket flower (*Gaillardia*)
- Columbine\* (*Aquilegia*)
- Coral Bells\* (*Heuchera*)
- Coreopsis (*Coreopsis*)
- Goldenrod (*Solidago*)
- Lamb's Ears (*Stachys*)
- Lupine (*Lupinus*)
- Mums (*Chrysanthemum*)
- Sunflower (perennial) (*Helianthus and Heliopsis* —depends which variety)
- Purple coneflower (*Echinacea*)
- Sedum (*Sedum*)

**Nectar plants.** Nectar plants such as salvia contain a sugar-rich liquid produced by the flowers that attract birds including hummingbirds.

## Water

Besides food, the element of your garden that attracts birds more than any other is water. The key is to place water in a semi-secluded spot that has nearby shrubs for cover. This allows birds to see approaching predators and have a place to perch until they are sure the area is safe.

Birds need a continuous supply of fresh, clean water at all times of the year, for both drinking and bathing. There are many options in providing water, including basins, birdbaths, fountains, ponds or more elaborate water features.

\*Plants that attract hummingbirds.

Hummingbirds prefer trumpet-shaped red, orange or pink flowers. Hummingbirds are believed to see the color red — especially a mass planting of it — from a half mile away.

**Grasses.** Seed heads on ornamental grasses are a food source for birds. Good choices include:

- Feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis acutiflora*)
- Liriope — all varieties
- Maiden grass (*Miscanthus sinensis*)
- Switch grass (*Panicum*)

#### Additional tips.

- Remember that insects are natural elements of a garden and are a food source for many birds. Using insecticides may poison bug-eating birds and will either diminish or completely wipe out the food supply for the birds you're trying to attract.
- To keep birds coming to your garden year-round, leave dead seedheads on flowers for the birds to feast on during the winter. And rake your leaves under shrubs to act as mulch. They'll harbor insects for ground-dwelling birds to eat. And, come spring, those dead leaves, grasses and plant stems will be a treasure trove for birds searching for nest material.

**Warm weather.** Clean the water source with a stiff brush every few days, adding clean water as needed. Make sure that it is no deeper than 3 inches at the deepest spots.

**Cold weather.** Keep water thawed during cold spells. Break up the ice and refill with fresh cold water. For the truly dedicated, there are also small birdbath heaters available at garden stores.

## Shelter

Birds need shelter from the weather (heavy rain or snow, extreme cold or heat and high winds), protection from predators, and places to sleep at night. The best bird shelter you can provide is lots of trees and thick areas of hedges and shrubs. For example:

- Trees provide shade on hot sunny days, and their canopy of leaves protects birds on rainy days.
- Bushing evergreens make a warm bird shelter on cold winter days and nights.
- Spreading boughs of evergreen trees keep the snow from piling up and shelter birds inside the branches of the tree.
- A row of trees made up of mixed species breaks the worst of the wind for both you and birds.
- Thick bushes and shrubs are a good shelter for birds when predators are around.
- Woody plants with thorns like barberries and roses are a good refuge from the neighbor's stalking cat.

If you have no trees on your property, use a brush pile to create a bird-friendly shelter. In a quiet corner of the yard, pile up small tree branches and woody plants, heaping them loosely so the pile has air cavities within it.

You can also make or buy roosting boxes for sheltering birds at night. Several birds will gather in one roosting box. Different from a nesting box, a roosting box has wooden dowel perches inside, no ventilation holes to prevent the birds' body heat from escaping, and the entrance hole is near the bottom of the box so the rising warmth doesn't escape.

## Nesting Sites

In addition to providing food and shelter for birds, shrubs and trees also provide places for birds to build their nests and let their eggs develop. Dense shrubs and trees are great nesting sites for the spring and summer. Tall ornamental and native grasses provide cover for ground nesting birds as well as a place to rest in bad weather.

### Common Backyard Birds in Kansas

American Goldfinch  
 American Robin  
 Baltimore Oriole  
 Black-capped Chickadee  
 Blue Jay  
 Downy Woodpecker  
 Eastern Bluebird  
 European Starling  
 Gray Catbird  
 House Finch  
 House Sparrow  
 House Wren  
 Northern Cardinal  
 Purple Martin  
 Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Since many older trees are being cut down, help the birds by providing nesting sites and setting up a variety of birdhouses. There is no such thing as "one size fits all." Decide which birds you want to lure, then research if you can provide a nesting environment for them. Pay attention to location and how high off the ground the nesting site should be. For birdhouses, the inside dimensions and the size of the entrance hole are especially important.

Good sources of information on nesting details are the library, catalogs, local retail stores that specialize in backyard birds, and Internet sites sponsored by bird societies and reputable interest groups.

"A perfect summer day is when the sun is shining, the breeze is blowing, the birds are singing, and the lawn mower is broken." —James Dent

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