

Seven Ways to Create a Bird-friendly Yard

By Germaine Ross, Landscape Designer St. Croix Valley Landscaping.

Following are seven general guidelines on how to design a garden that appeals to both birds and people.

1. Provide foods during different seasons.



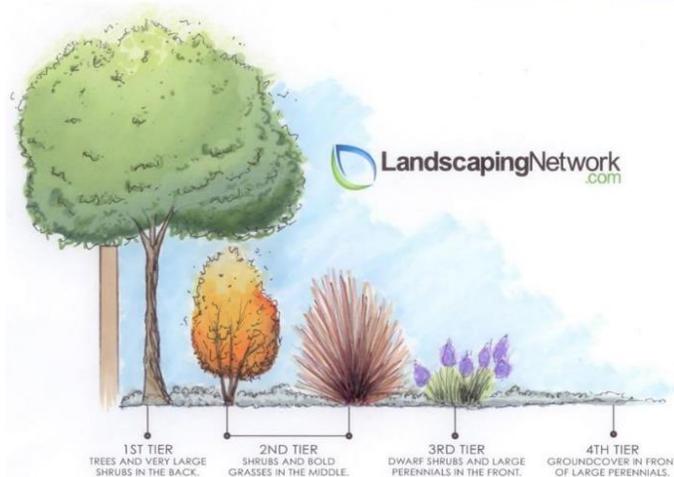
Different birds require different kinds of foods in different seasons. During the rigorous chick-rearing days, for example, parent birds get the energy they need by feeding on sweet fruits such as blackberries, juneberries, elderberries and, mulberries. Fall migrants (thrushes, vireos, and warblers) require fatty fruits such as mapleleaf viburnum to build fat reserves for their long journey, while wintering birds (finches, sparrows, and waxwings) need abundant, persistent fruits such as those of conifers,

hawthorns, viburnums, crabapples, and sumacs to help them survive subfreezing temperatures. Such persistent fruits are also extremely important for early spring migrants such as bluebirds, robins, and thrashers.

2. Create layers

Birds love natural areas that are composed of various layers of plant growth and use most or all of these various layers for a multitude of purposes. The Wood Thrush, for instance, usually sings from the highest trees -- those that form the canopy. They build their nests in the layer of tall shrubs below, and find food by scratching through leaf litter.

Their nests include material from all of the layers, including mud, leaves, and grapevine bark.



A handy rule of thumb is to plant tall maples or oaks along the periphery of your property. Closer to your house, plant understory trees like service berries or pagoda dogwoods, then large shrubs like American cranberry or redbud dogwood. Closer still, groundcovers such as bunch grasses and wildflowers. If your garden already has large trees, establish islands of variable-height plantings around them.

3. Provide at least one clump of evergreens.

Birds find shelter in evergreen conifers during storms and winter weather. They also are preferred roosting (sleeping) and nesting sites.

4. Limit the size of your lawn.

A manicured lawn provides little in the way of food or habitat for birds, and typically contributes to a host of other environmental problems associated with fertilizing, mowing, and the use of pesticides to control insects and diseases. Across the country, people are changing the composition of their yards and introducing more variety. Consider converting other areas that you do not need into bird habitat and other low-maintenance plants, including wildflowers, grasses, and shrubs.

5. Supply a source of water.

Birds will readily use open water sources for drinking and bathing. Birds need water not only for drinking but also to cool themselves in the heat of the summer, while wintering birds welcome water when natural supplies become locked in ice and snow and are unavailable. Baths atop pedestals will keep birds out of reach of predatory cats and



are easier to clean than ground-level baths. When choosing a bath, find one with a shallow slope, as most birds are short-legged and avoid deep water.

Birds are especially attracted to pools that have a dripping action; they like to perch on the source of the drip and drink drops of water before they fall into the pool.

Birds bathe and drink in winter as well as summer, so make sure your bath does not freeze over completely during cold weather. At lower temperatures, you will need to install an electric heating device to provide a reliable water source.

6. Leave some leaf litter for the birds.

Rather than raking leaves into a pile for roadside pick-up, use them to create feeding places for ground-feeding birds such as thrashers, White-throated Sparrow, and robins and other thrushes. Just rake the leaves under hedges or trees that produce a dense shade. Rake the leaves in the fall, creating beds five to six inches thick; by spring, they will have decomposed just enough to have attracted a good supply of earthworms, insects, and other animals on which the birds feed.

7. Use pesticides sparingly, if at all.

Some pesticides harm birds directly. Others kill or contaminate insects and other creatures on which many birds feed.

Keep in mind that the typical lawn is coddled with an arsenal of chemicals. If you're thinking of hiring a lawn-care company, choose one that favors the use of alternatives to chemical insecticides and herbicides. If they do recommend the use of chemicals, ask for the names of the substances, the reasons for their use, the quantities to be applied, and where and when it will be done.