

May 2020 Gardener's Corner

By Cate White, San Joaquin County Master Gardener

As we live through unprecedented times, I hope you have all managed to stay well, keeping in touch with friends and relatives and finding ways to stay productive and engaged. Fortunately, one place we can always find relaxation and enjoyment is in our own backyards. Enjoying the outdoors is a great way to reduce anxiety, and gardening provides exercise that can help keep us fit and healthy. In addition to enjoying the fresh air, sunshine and plants in our yards, we can also enjoy the wildlife. Bird watching in particular can be a pleasurable backyard hobby. The following ideas will help make your backyard a haven for birds.

There are three essential ingredients for creating a bird-friendly garden: food, water, and shelter.

Growing berry-producing shrubs will provide birds with nutritious food. The best choices are California natives, and there are many varieties that grow well in our area. Manzanitas come in many forms, from large bushes to low growing ground covers. All have attractive flowers followed by small red fruits. Toyon, or California Holly, grows into a large bush or small tree, and has small white flowers in the spring that become bright red berries in winter. Oregon Grape has showy yellow flowers full of nectar for Hummingbirds in the spring, and purplish juicy berries in the fall. Ceanothus, or California Lilac has abundant beautiful blue flowers attractive to Hummingbirds in the spring that develop into nutritious seeds later in the season. There are many varieties, from groundcovers to large bushes. Also good are common horticultural shrubs such as Pyracanthus, Viburnum and Cotoneaster, which comes in bush or ground cover forms. All supply berries for many songbirds such as finches, robins, cedar waxwings and mockingbirds.

Many species of sage have flowers are particularly attractive to Hummingbirds. Flowers of lavender plants also draw hummingbirds, as do other flowering herbs, including oregano, mint, catnip, basil, and thyme. Catmint, a low growing plant with pretty, blue flowers is another favorite.



***Manzanita Flowers**
UC Arboretum All Stars Photo*



***Toyon Berries**
UC Arboretum All Stars Photo*

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Arbutus Marina
UC Arboretum All Stars Photo

Many birds, including Hummingbirds, Finches and Sparrows are insect eaters. All have been adversely impacted by the increasing use of harsh, long-lasting chemicals in our environment. These are not only dangerous for birds but also deprive them of an important food source. Use low impact pesticides that break down quickly, such as insecticidal soaps and neem oil. Keep in mind that having a few insects in your garden helps to feed the birds.

Water is often overlooked as a strategy for attracting birds. They are attracted to moving water, so fountains draw their attention. Fountains or birdbaths with shallow basins and a rim for perching make good bathing and drinking sources. If you use chemicals in your fountain to keep algae or mosquito larva at bay, make sure the label states it is safe for birds.

Birds look for perches in trees and bushes that have exposed branches. They also like to hide under low growing bushes. Avoid pruning your shrubs so closely that birds have no open space for resting. Also avoid pruning away growth close to the ground, since those are places birds look for secure shelter from weather and predators. For more information about birds and ways to make your garden bird friendly, go to the California Audubon Society web site: ca.audubon.org.

May Garden Checklist

- Control ants with baits or traps. Eliminate standing water under flowerpots, and in drain pipes or gutters to control mosquitos.
- Keep monitoring citrus for Asian Citrus Psyllid
- Look for oozing or dead limbs on apple, crabapple, pear and pyracantha, a sign of Fire Blight.
- Continue monitoring and adjusting irrigation according to the weather.
- Apply mulch to bare areas.

- Check for signs of powdery mildew on apple, crepe myrtle and roses. Control with neem oil.
- Control aphids with insecticidal soap or neem oil.
- Put out and maintain Yellowjacket traps.
- Plant or sow seeds of cucumber, beans, squash, and melons. Start seed potatoes. It's still time to plant tomatoes, peppers and eggplant. Also plant flowering summer annuals such as zinnias, petunias, portulaca and vinca.
- Aerate lawns that get heavy foot traffic.
- Fertilize cane berries, citrus, deciduous fruit trees, palms, and heavily flowering shrubs with slow release fertilizer if not done in March or April.