

How to Make Your Yard Bird-Friendly

Birds are nature's messengers, and they're broadcasting loud and clear: They have been experiencing devastating habitat loss as development continues to spread across our state, and these dangers will only grow over time. Our area is especially at risk, with the highest projected percentage increase in urban land development in the state. You can help birds thrive right where you live by making your yard more bird-friendly. Follow the steps below to create a patch of vibrant habitat that attracts colorful birds and their sweet melodies. If you don't have a yard, you can still help birds by creating a native plant container garden on your patio or balcony. Even very small patches of habitat provide tired, hungry birds with exactly what they need, particularly during migration. The secret to success lies in choosing locally native plants, which brim with nutritious insects, berries, nectar, and seeds and give birds vital refuge.

1. Choose Your Plants

Focus on native plants that provide a good variety of bird food throughout the year for nesting, migrating, and wintering birds. You can search our native plants database (<https://www.audubon.org/native-plants>) for listings of the best bird- and wildlife-friendly plants for your area, as well as a list of native plant nurseries and other resources near you. As you make your selections, think about providing the following food groups:

- **Bugs:** Native trees such as oaks, elm, holly, and buttonbush, and native herbaceous plants such as goldenrod, milkweed, and Black-eyed Susan host many caterpillar species that are a vital source of protein for birds, especially during the breeding season.
- **Fruit:** Many shrubs and small trees provide berries that ripen at different times, so include seasonal variety: beautyberry and pokeweed for birds during the breeding season and summer; cedar and holly trees to sustain birds through cold winter days and nights.
- **Nuts and seeds:** Trees such as oaks and long-leaf pine provide fat and protein rich food that birds hide, or "cache," to provide food through the cold winter. Native sunflowers, asters, coneflowers, and grasses produce loads of tiny seeds that are finch and sparrow favorites.
- **Nectar:** Red tubular flowers such as native cardinal flower, cross vine, trumpet creeper, and honeysuckle serve up nectar for hummingbirds. Flowers in the aster family, such as coneflowers, asters, and Joe-Pye Weed are very attractive to insect pollinators like butterflies, moths, and bees, in addition to providing seeds for birds.

2. Plan Your Bird Habitat

Think of your garden as a habitat that *you* are creating to provide birds with food, shelter, and nesting sites throughout the year.

- **Take stock of the plants you've already got:** Your yard may already include native plants that birds love.
- **Know the basics about your space:**
 - *Sun or shade?* How much of the planting area is covered in shade? Is it shaded all-day, only sometimes, or never at all? Plants are usually labeled as growing best in full-sun, partial shade, or full shade, so knowing this will help you choose plants that will do well.
 - *Wet or dry?* How damp is the soil? Do you have to water frequently to keep grass alive? Does the soil remain wet for long periods of time? You may find that different areas of your yard are wetter than others, and require different plant choices.
 - *What's your soil like?* What is your soil type? Is it light and full of sand or heavy with clay?
- **Map it out:** Measure your planting space and then either draw it out on paper or walk your garden bed, to figure out which plants will fit best where.
- **Create "habitat layers":** If you have room, try to provide the plant layers you might find in a natural habitat:
 - *Large canopy trees* provide many resources including nuts, nest cavities, and other roosting spots. In our area, consider Live Oak, Eastern Red Cedar, Red Maple, American Holly, Sweet Magnolia, Parsley Hawthorn, or Long Leaf Pine.
 - *Shrubs and small trees* often provide fruit, as well as nesting sites for songbirds. Consider American Beautyberry, American Black Elderberry, Common Buttonbush, Possumhaw, Firebush, Sparkleberry, or Southern Bayberry.
 - *Herbaceous plants*, including perennials, annuals, and groundcovers, provide seeds for birds and a rich habitat for pollinators. Consider Anise-Scented Goldenrod, Butterfly Milkweed, Black-Eyed Susan, Blood Sage, Button Sage, Cucumber-Leaf Sunflower, Dense Gayfeather, and Firewheel. Purple Passionflower, Trumpet Creeper, and Yellow Jessamine are vine options.
 - *Decaying leaves, wood, detritus, and soil* form the base of your habitat, and a home for many invertebrates that birds eat, including the pupae of most *moth caterpillars*—a favorite of baby birds
- **Think about height:** Place taller plants towards the back of your borders, with lower-growing species at the edges of paths or lawn.
- **Lose some lawn:** Consider reversing the typical pattern of small garden beds surrounded by expanses of lawn. Larger patches of habitat with lawn pathways will create a rich wildlife habitat and lovely effect in your yard. (You can start small; every bit counts!)
- **Cluster plants in masses:** Group 5 or more of the same plant species together. This creates an attractive look and is also favored by pollinators, which prefer to feed from a mass of the same flower species.
- **Design for color palettes** and continuous blooming throughout the gardening season.
- **Leave some room:** Pay attention to each species' stated dimensions when full grown, so plants aren't too crowded together.

- **Remember the water:** Water is an often-overlooked resource that birds need year-round. Include hollowed boulders that catch rainwater or a man-made bird bath for birds to drink and bathe in. Consider a drip bath or fountain feature; the sound of running water is particularly attractive to birds and may bring them flocking during migration.
3. After planting remember -
- **Leave the seeds:** Don't "dead-head" all of your flowering plants after they bloom, as those seed heads can be an important source of food during the fall and winter.
 - **Don't rake:** Fallen leaves and woody debris are an important habitat layer, and serve as a natural mulch. They will reduce unwanted weed growth, keep your plants' roots cool and moist—and provide habitat for insects and the pupae of moth caterpillars, a favorite of baby birds.
 - **Leave dead wood:** In forested areas, leave dead trees and branches. Fallen trunks and branches support the entire forest food web as they decay into rich soil. Standing tree trunks may provide homes for many cavity-nesting species: Woodpeckers often create or enlarge the cavities, but many species will nest in them, including chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, bluebirds, Tree Swallows, Great-crested Flycatchers, Wood Ducks, and American Kestrels.
 - **Lay off the pesticides:** A bird-friendly garden is a bug-friendly garden. A diversity of native plants will also attract wildlife that will keep your plant-eating bugs in check: Not only birds but also frogs, toads, bats, and insect predators such as dragonflies, praying mantises and lady bugs will help keep your garden in a healthy balance.
 - **Reduce collisions:** If you've added feeders, place them less than three feet from a window or more than 30 feet away. Mobiles, opaque decorations, and fruit tree netting outside windows also helps to deflect birds from the glass.

Modified from a National Audubon Society article April 08, 2016:
<https://www.audubon.org/news/how-make-your-yard-bird-friendly-0>

Local Native Plant Nurseries:

Hickory Hill Native Nursery

27212 Hickory Hill Road
 Brooksville, FL 34602
 (352) 754-9701

Landmark Nursery

853 East Lake Road
 Tarpon Springs, FL 34688
 (727) 938-2971

landmarknursery.com/