

Landscaping for Birds



Peder Stenslie

Song sparrow using backyard bird bath.

This demonstration garden exhibits trees, shrubs, and grasses that wild birds use for food, shelter or nesting. Your backyard can also be landscaped to attract different types of birds and also butterflies, beneficial insects and bats. This is done by providing the four basic needs of wildlife. The basic needs are:

Food—Every species has its own unique food requirements. Various plant materials can provide fruits and berries, nectar, nuts and acorns; browse plants such as twigs and buds; and forage plants such as grasses and legumes.

Shelter—Birds and other wildlife need cover from adverse weather and predators. Shelter is especially important when animals are

nesting. It's also necessary when animals rest or sleep. Shelter can be trees, shrubs, grasses, brush piles, hollow trees or human built structures such as bird houses.

Water—All animals need water. Some animals get water from the plants they eat and others get it from wetlands, ponds, lakes and rivers. The Living Lab has a small seasonal wetland and of course, the Red River. If you want to provide a good landscape for wildlife, water is a vital component. If natural sources of water are not present, they can be created by developing ponds or wetlands. In the typical backyard, bird baths are often used. Dripping or flowing water is usually more attractive to wildlife than standing water and also attracts fewer mosquitoes.

Space—Every animal has unique territorial or space needs. By understanding those needs you can design your space appropriately. For example, bluebirds need about 5 acres per pair, but purple martins do not defend territories around their nests so many pairs can use a relatively small area.

When selecting your plant materials some things to consider include:

Use local native plants—Native plants are adapted to the climate of this area so winter kill isn't a problem. Only a minimum amount of maintenance is needed once they are established. Since they don't require the application of chemicals for good growth, they usually are safer for birds. At the Living Lab, most new material that we plant is native.

Seasonality—Provide the four basic needs of wildlife through out the year. For example, some plants such as the redosier dogwood provide fall and early winter berries. Some shrubs or grasses can provide winter cover.

Function—The structure or function of the plant is more important than its appearance to humans. Don't base a planting decision solely on the beauty of the plant. Does it provide summer food, winter food, winter shelter or nesting cover?

Diversity—High species diversity helps protect against drastic changes caused by plant diseases or insect pests. Also think of diversity as the height and size of the plant as well as a variety of plant types.



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Rose-breasted grosbeak tending nest in heavy brush hiding it from predators.



River Keepers

A viburnum bush provides winter berries.

Arrangement—Plant material needs to be properly arranged or interspersed to maximize its value to wildlife. For example, a winter food source needs to be located next to cover. Consider prevailing winds, snow drifting and soil erosion control when designing your plantings. And, don't think in straight lines. Nature doesn't plant material in straight lines, so try use clumps or curved lines.

Protection—Explore ways to protect wildlife from unnecessary mortality. The use of dangerous, persistent or non-specific chemicals needs to be limited. Consider the use of natural methods of insect or weed control. Don't feed or shelter house sparrows or European starlings. Both birds are very harmful to our native bird population. Free ranging cats and dogs are harmful to wildlife. They need to be kept under control.