

Guide to Landscaping for Birds



As you begin to design your backyard sanctuary for birds, it is helpful to try to see the property from a bird's perspective. As you walk around the yard, imagine how it might look to a blackpoll warbler on fall migration. The sun is rising over New Jersey and, exhausted and famished after a long night's flight, it is looking for a place where trees and shrubs will provide the food and cover it needs to regain energy and continue on to Venezuela. Or imagine a mourning dove searching for a suitable nesting site as winter draws to a close. Are there evergreen trees and shrubs for an early March nest? Can the dove see or hear water? Can its basic needs be met?

Designing your Landscape for Birds

With the needs of birds for food, water, shelter, and the cover they need to raise their young in mind, you can begin to create a one, two, or five year plan to enhance your property. Typically, suburban yards – often landscaped with only a few scattered trees and perhaps some foundation plantings – are inadequate in meeting birds' needs, but that situation can be greatly improved by creating larger, massed plantings. For most homeowners this means converting some lawn areas to shrub and tree borders. Manicured lawns provide almost no wildlife value and typically cost the homeowner time, energy, and money. Lawns also have a negative impact on the environment when herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers are applied and when water resources are used to maintain turf. Converting some of your lawn into an area with more plant diversity is an important first step in re-landscaping for birds.

To maximize the enhanced habitat, work from your property's boundaries in toward your house. The more edge you can create the more useful the landscape for birds. And since larger contiguous areas of vegetation provide far better shelter and cover, your individual sanctuary efforts will be vastly improved if your neighbors join in by enhancing their borders, too. Bird-scaping with your neighbors will also make it possible for you to plant larger trees such as tulip, sycamore, hickory, and white pine near your boundaries.

As you walk your property, look for areas where you might incorporate individual trees into a landscape border, or areas that are not otherwise used by your family for gardening or recreational activities. You can begin to visualize where a mix of evergreen and deciduous trees will be planted by placing flower pots around on 10-20 ft. centers. With your tree "markers" in place, allow room for an understory planting of smaller fruiting trees and shrubs by placing additional markers on 5-8 ft. centers. With the markers in place, lay a garden hose on the ground and adjust it to your liking, taking into consideration ease of mowing. Delineate the edge with a shovel or lawn edger.

Now is a good time to estimate the number of trees and shrubs you will need. You may want to photocopy and enlarge the survey map you acquired when you purchased your home to help in your design.

Selecting the Trees and Shrubs for Birds

To create a backyard sanctuary, select plants that best meet the needs of birds. Highest on the list are native trees and shrubs that provide food in the form of nuts, seeds, berries, fruits, and nectar. Native trees are especially suited to our growing conditions, and our native birds are adapted to feeding on what they provide. Nesting birds feed their young a diet that is almost exclusively made up of protein-rich insects, insects that are also adapted to native trees and shrubs (insects that won't be found in forsythia, Bradford pear, and a host of other all too commonly planted aliens). Food-bearing trees are especially critical to New Jersey's huge numbers of migratory birds, who must be able to find massed and adequate supplies of food if they are to survive their journeys. Another consideration when selecting food sources is seasonality. Choose a varied seasonal mix to provide food year-round: some spring and summer food sources such as chokeberry, serviceberry, and cherry; some autumn sources such as oaks, dogwoods, and red cedars; and some winter sources such as northern bayberry, holly, and crab apples. Keep in mind, too, that many birds rely heavily on insects, especially during migration and when feeding young. Birch, sweetgum, sassafras, and many other native trees and shrubs are important secondary food sources for birds that forage among their branches gleaning insects.

The next element to consider is how much shelter and cover a tree or shrub provides. Be sure to include a mix of evergreen trees and shrubs in your plan because evergreens provide protection from harsh wind and weather in winter and in inclement weather, as well as cover for early spring nesters such as robins, mourning doves, and house finches. As you develop your plan, arrange the trees and shrubs so they are varied in height, fullness, and texture. Since most birds forage and nest at particular levels in the canopy or on the forest floor, it is best to create layers by stepping the vegetation up from ground covers, to medium and large shrubs, and finally to trees.

Planting the Trees and Shrubs

When purchasing trees and shrubs, choose plants that are balled and burlapped or container grown with healthy disease-free bark and leaves. Arrange the shrubs and trees according to your plan and the height/space requirements. Mix fast and slow growing trees together and vary the evergreen/deciduous mix. Wait to begin digging until you have arranged all the new plantings.

A general rule of thumb is to give them more room than you think they'll need. Most trees and shrubs grow faster than we think they will and considerably larger, too. Add wet peat moss to the holes as each specimen is planted.

New trees and shrubs will need to be watered during the first growing season or two, and after that in times of drought. Your trees and shrubs should receive half an inch of water twice a week. Set up several coffee cans and time how long it takes for your sprinkler to provide half an inch of water to the planting area. Base your future watering on that amount of time, adjusting for rainfall. If you are using a soaker hose or drip irrigation, water twice a week until the soil is moist 6-8 inches down.

Providing Water for Birds

Water is essential to birds for drinking and bathing. Providing bird baths year-round is an easy way to help them meet this basic need. Ideally, the bath should be about 3 ft. high and positioned near shrubs or trees where birds can escape from danger. It is a good idea, especially if you have cats, to leave several feet of open space between the bath and the plantings so the birds have time to escape before a predator can approach. Place one or more flat rocks toward the edge of the bath, creating terraces that are 2-4 inches deep. A drip set-up will help migrating birds to locate the water. A heating cable in the coldest winter months will help winter residents.

Nest Boxes & Natural Cavities for Birds

Many species of hole-nesting birds have come to rely on artificial cavities. These birds formerly relied solely on cavities in dead and dying trees for nest sites but now will use wooden nest boxes in residential settings. Among these are the tufted titmouse, Carolina chickadee, and house wren. Many additional species – purple martins, bluebirds, and yellow-shafted flickers, for example – will benefit from bird houses, but since their habitat needs are more specific, make sure you have the right conditions before purchasing or constructing houses for these birds. Of course, leaving dead or dying trees standing is the best management practice as they provide ideal nesting and roosting sites as well as food for woodpeckers, nuthatches, and other bark-gleaning species.

Recommended Tree and Shrub List for Birds

Here's a quick list of native plants that will attract birds to your yard. Mature height is given in parentheses after the Common and botanical names.

Evergreen Shrubs and Trees

American Holly, *Ilex opaca* [15-50']
Eastern Red Cedar, *Juniperus virginiana* [40-50']
Inkberry Holly, *Ilex glabra* [6-10']
Pitch Pine, *Pinus rigida* [40-60']
White Pine, *Pinus strobes* [80-100']

Deciduous Shrubs and Small Trees

Blueberries, *Vaccinium spp* [3-10']
Chokeberries, *Aronia spp* [2-10']
Dogwoods, *Cornus spp* [10-30']
Hawthorns, *Crataegus spp* [20-30']
Northern Bayberry, *Myrica cerifera* [3-8']
Shadbush, Serviceberry, *Amelanchier spp* [10-20']
Sumacs, *Rhus spp* [5-15']
Viburnums, *Viburnum spp* [6-15']
Winterberry Holly, *Ilex verticillata* [5-15']

Larger Deciduous Trees

Birches, *Betula spp* [20-50']
Crab Apple, *Malus spp* [20-30']
Eastern Sycamore, *Platanus occidentalis* [50-130']
Hackberry, *Celtis occidentalis* [30-50']
Red Mulberry, *Morus rubra*
Sassafras, *Sassafras albidum* [20-50']
Sour Gum (Black Tupelo), *Nyssa sylvatica* [40-60']
Sweetgum, *Liquidambar styraciflua* [50-120']
Tulip Tree, *Liriodendron tulipifera* [60-150']
Wild Cherry, *Prunus serotina* [50-80']