

# What's Growing On in the garden?

Germantown Hills School Garden Newsletter

March 12, 2007

## FOCUS ON...

### The Bird Garden

Technically it is still winter, for a few more weeks at least. Spring seems to make a short appearance and then it is whisked away with another blast of cold. However, we know that spring weather is just around the corner. We see small signs of spring all around us. The skies are showing some clear blue days and the sun suddenly has just a hint of real warmth in it. If you look very carefully, you will see a tiny bit of green on a few plants. Some of the very early bulbs are beginning to make an appearance. There are a few robins that have made their way back to Illinois. I even saw some geese flying north over the river last week.

Birds that are brave enough to stay in Illinois in winter deserve our help. Providing food and shelter is critical for their winter survival.

Birds that are common to feeders in central Illinois during the winter include woodpeckers, bluejays, nuthatches, finches, juncos, titmouse, sparrows, cardinals and chickadees. You may have seen some of these birds in our school garden. Our bird garden is very new so many of our area birds have not discovered it yet. Birds are very smart once they find a source of easy food, so they will "learn" to use our feeders. Next winter we should have many more birds.



The Bird Garden is located at the north end of the garden, by the windows. An Autumn Brilliance Serviceberry tree (*Amelanchier x grandiflora* 'Autumn Brilliance') sits right in the middle of the Bird Garden. This tree will feature

beautiful scented white flowers in mid to late April. After blooming, the leaves slowly emerge. The berries are formed early in the season. They are bright red and are an excellent source of nutrition for the birds. I have seen a single robin eat all of the berries from an entire serviceberry tree in one day, chirping happily as he dined. The leaves on the serviceberry are bright orange, yellow and red in the fall. This is an excellent tree for the home landscape, its mature height is only 10-20 feet. Here is a link for more information on serviceberry: [http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/shrub-selector/detail\\_plant.cfm?PlantID=344](http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/shrub-selector/detail_plant.cfm?PlantID=344)



The Bird Garden also contains a variety of shrubs to feed and shelter the birds. Our favorite are the very special Cardinal Candy Viburnum (*Viburnum dentatum* 'Cardinal Candy'). The garden also contains two one Chokecherry shrubs, one produces black berries, the other produces red berries.

The Bird Garden also hosts a variety of perennial flowers; including Purple Coneflowers, Black Eyed Susan and Gayfeather.

We offer three feeding stations in the Bird Garden. The top station is a blend of seed to attract a wide variety of songbirds. We also have a peanut feeder that will attract woodpeckers, chickadees, nuthatches, creepers, titmice, and wrens. The third feeding station is for sunflower hearts. This seed is especially for the smaller birds, such as wrens and titmouse.

Along with food you need to provide open water in the winter. We have a birdbath right by the door with a heater to keep it from freezing. In very cold weather, this needs to be filled about every other day. This is essential to prevent the birdbath from freezing and cracking in the cold weather.

At the other end of the garden there is a platform bird feeder. This feeder contains the same general mix of birdseed to satisfy most of our winter birds. The platform just allows for a different type of feeding. Both of our feeders have a feeding "arm" that is actually just a cut tree branch. We will continue to use these feeder arms until our garden trees are more mature and provide natural perches.

Notice how the different types of birds eat. Some birds, like the nuthatch, actually eat upside down. Many types of birds fly to the feeder to select their special seed, then move to a tree branch to actually break open and eat the seed.

This month will bring big changes in our local birds. The small juncos will move on, the robins will move in. All of our birds will be more active as they begin their nesting. Maybe we will even have the pleasure of hosting a nesting bird in our garden!



## Nine Ways to Design a Bird-Friendly Garden

Before you begin designing your bird garden, be sure to visit several nearby natural areas, such as parks and wildlife sanctuaries. These will give you a sense of what kinds of plants make up the natural bird habitat in your area. Take notes on which species grow in these natural places and how the plant communities are structured - how they form vertical layers, for example, and how some plants occur in large drifts. Re-creating a similar type of growth using species native to your area is the key to a successful bird garden.

Following are nine tips on how to design a garden that appeals to both birds and people.

1. *Limit the size of your lawn.* Across the country, people are gradually replacing the monotonous green of the lawn with more natural plant communities closely mimicking the prairies or woodlands that existed before suburbia altered the American landscape. Such habitats are more interesting and much kinder to backyard birds.
2. *Re-create the layers of plant growth* found in local natural areas. Be sure to mimic the vertical layers of nearby native plant communities when designing your bird garden. In forested regions, a handy rule of thumb is to plant tall trees along the periphery of your property; a bit closer to the house, plant understory trees, then large shrubs, small shrubs and, closer still, groundcovers such as bunch grasses and wildflowers. If you live in a prairie region, you will have some success attracting wild birds by keeping the lawn in grass and planting a few shrubs that the birds will use as singing posts.
3. *Select plants with an eye to providing nutritional 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, mulberries and wild cherries. Fall migrants (thrushes, vireos and warblers) require fatty fruits such as flowering dogwood, spicebush and mapleleaf viburnum to build fat reserves for their long journey. Wintering birds (finches, sparrows and waxwings) need abundant, persistent fruits such as those of conifers, bayberry and sumacs to help them survive sub-freezing temperatures.
4. *Plant small trees and shrubs in same species clumps.* This is necessary for pollination of shrubs with separate male and female plants, such as hollies and mulberries. Even for species with flowers of both sexes on the same plant, planting in clumps helps boost fertility and therefore fruit yields. Clumps also benefit birds by providing highly visible, massed displays of fruit.
5. *Provide at least one clump of conifers.* Birds find shelter in evergreen conifers during storms and winter weather. They also are preferred roosting (sleeping) and nesting sites.
6. *Leave vines or plant them.* Vines such as Virginia creeper, wild grape and greenbrier provide birds with perches, nesting places and, in some cases, abundant fruit crops.
7. *Leave some leaf litter for the birds.* This creates feeding places for ground feeding birds such as robins and other thrushes.
8. *Use pesticides sparingly.* Some pesticides harm birds directly. Others kill or contaminate insects on which birds feed.
9. *Provide nest boxes.* This is the simplest way to increase the variety of birds nesting on your property. In all, 48 species are known to raise young in nest boxes, including bluebirds, tree swallows and purple martins.

Source: The article above is excerpted from *Bird Gardens*, ©1998 by Brooklyn Botanic Garden, 1000 Washington Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11225, 718-622-4433.



## Seeds to Feed Central Illinois Birds

**Blue Jay**.....Black striped sunflower, peanut kernels, black oil sunflower  
**Cardinal**.....Black striped sunflower, safflower seeds, black oil sunflower, cracked corn, millet, other seeds, unsalted nutmeats, raisins  
**Oriole**.....Hummingbird nectar, grape jelly  
**Mockingbird**.....Orange halves, sliced raw apple, raisins, suet, corn bread  
**Goldfinch**.....Thistle, niger, black oil sunflower, hulled sunflower seeds  
**Hummingbird**.....Hummingbird nectar  
**House Finch** .....Thistle, niger, black oil sunflower, hulled sunflower seeds  
**Mourning Dove**.....Oil-type sunflower seeds, white and red proso millet, safflower, cracked corn, wheat, milo, other seeds

**Downy Woodpecker**.....Suet, corn bread, peanut butter, unsalted nutmeats, sunflower seeds, cracked corn  
**Nuthatch**.....Black striped sunflower  
**Grosbeak**.....Sunflower seeds of all types, safflower, cracked corn  
**Tufted Titmouse**.....Black striped sunflower, peanut kernels  
**Catbird**.....grape jelly  
**Dark-Eyed Junco**.....millet, finely cracked corn, oil-type sunflower seed, unsalted nutmeats, canary seeds  
**Black-Capped Chickadee**...Suet, black striped sunflower, peanut kernels, black oil sunflower, cracked unsalted nutmeats, safflower  
**Carolina Chickadee**.....Suet, black striped sunflower, peanut kernels, black oil sunflower  
**Native Sparrows**.....Red or white proso millet, oil-type sunflower seeds, cracked corn, some safflower.

