

# How to Make Your Yard Bird-Friendly

*Grow a beautiful garden that provides a safe haven for birds in the face of climate change.*

Birds are nature's messengers, and they're broadcasting loud and clear: They are already experiencing the [devastating impacts of climate change](#) and habitat loss, and these dangers will only grow over time.

In the face of these threats, 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 Native 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](#) 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, willows, birches, and maples, and native herbaceous plants such as goldenrod, milkweed, and sunflowers 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: serviceberry and cherry for birds during the breeding season and summer; dogwood and spicebush for songbirds flying south; cedar and holly trees to sustain birds through cold winter days and nights.
- **Nuts and seeds:** Trees such as oaks, hickories, and walnuts provide fat and protein rich food that birds hide, or "cache," to provide food through the cold winter. Native sunflowers, asters, and coneflowers produce loads of tiny seeds that are finch and sparrow favorites.

- **Nectar:** Red tubular flowers such as native columbine, penstemon, and honeysuckle serve up nectar for hummingbirds. ([Learn more](#) about creating a habitat specifically 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. If you need help, check the [native plants database](#) Local Resource tab: Your local Audubon or native plant society may be able to provide advice.
- **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? Is it almost black, like peaty soil, or is it very smooth, like silt soil? (If you're not sure, don't worry. Many plants do well in a variety of soils, and a local nursery may be able to advise on this.)
- **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
  - *Shrubs and small trees* often provide fruit, as well as nesting sites for songbirds
  - *Herbacious plants*, including perennials, annuals, and groundcovers, provide seeds for birds and a rich habitat for pollinators
  - *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
- **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.

Source: National Audubon Society, April 08, 2016

- **Think about height:** Place taller plants towards the back of your borders, with lower-growing species at the edges of paths or lawn.
- **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.
- **Need more plant specifics?** If you're seeking more details about bloom and fruiting time, growing seasons, or full-grown plant dimensions, check the online databases offered by the [USDA](#) or the [National Gardening Association](#).
- **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. [Here are some tips](#) on maintaining a healthy bird bath.



*Purple coneflower is a perennial that is native to eastern North America. Photo: Kristina Deckert/Audubon*



*Sword ferns, Vancouveria, and redwood sorrel flank a flagstone path at a home in Bow, Washington. Photo: Mark Turner*

### **3. Preparing your garden**

Prepare your garden well to save headaches later. If your site currently has turf grass or invasive plants, you will need to remove these. If you plan ahead, an easy method is to lay down newspaper at least six sheets deep, with plenty of overlap; wet it down; cover it with 4 to 6 inches of mulch; and let it sit until you are ready to plant. Though native plants generally don't require additional fertilizer, you may want to check with your local native plant retailer to see if enriching your soil with organic compost is a good idea. Use deep edging—putting some sort of barrier (steel or plastic edging) that goes into the ground to separate the native plant area from the lawn area—to keep out lawn grass.

### **4. Planting**

Plant in spring or fall and on cooler days. Follow planting instructions carefully and get tips on mulching around plants from the plant nursery or gardening center. Water as needed after planting: Native plants are adapted to local climate conditions and generally require less added

water than non-native species, in the long run. However, almost all plants need some watering and extra care till they've become well established.

## ***5. Caring for Your Garden***

Steward your native plant habitat with tender loving care—but don't be too neat.

- **Weed:** Remove non-native and invasive weeds. Weeding is often maligned as a "chore"... but it's also a great excuse to spend time in your garden and get to know its wildlife.
- **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 the seeds:** Don't "dead-head" all of your flowering plants after they bloom, as those seedheads can be an important source of food during the fall and winter.
- **Spare your back:** 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.
- **Build a brush pile:** Enhance your garden area by [creating a brush pile](#) to provide shelter for birds and other wildlife.
- **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. Read more about pesticides, and some low-impact alternatives, [here](#).

Learn more about the benefits of keeping a [slightly messy yard here](#).

Check out more tips from the native plant master Doug Tallamy in [Bringing Nature Home](#).

### ***Find Your Bird-Friendly Plants***

Native plants provide birds with the food they need. Use our database to discover the best plants for birds in your area. **Search the Database** at: [www.audubon.org/native-plants](http://www.audubon.org/native-plants)

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