CREATING A GARDEN FOR BIRDS

White-breasted Nuthatch and suburban garden

Few things are as interesting and beautiful as songbirds. They brighten up the darkest days of winter, adding music and color to our lives. What can we do to repay them? For starters, we can make our yards more bird-friendly. Never before has suitable habitat for birds been in such short supply. Urban areas are expanding constantly, altering or destroying natural areas. By creating bird gardens, we provide oases for birds in the heart of our cities. Not only the birds benefit. If you make your yard more attractive to birds, you'll have the pleasure of seeing an increasing number and variety of birds there.

The first step in designing a bird garden is to evaluate your yard from a bird's perspective. Does it provide the basic necessities—food, water, shelter—that birds need to survive? If not, which are lacking? If there's a shortage of food, you can hang up bird feeders, but also consider planting some fruit-bearing trees or shrubs. Plants that hold their fruits through the winter provide a vital food source for nonmigratory birds. Add variety to the kinds of food you offer, and you'll attract a wider variety of bird species.

With a little effort, you can easily turn your yard into a welcome haven for songbirds.

A good water source will draw birds like a magnet. Even just a common birdbath purchased at a garden supply shop will do. Some people hang a plastic bottle or jug of water with a hole in the bottom over their birdbath. The motion and sound of the dripping water is irresistible to many birds.

Does your yard have an area of dense thickets that birds could use for nesting, secluded perching, or escape cover? If not, then plant some shrubs or make a hedge. Consider growing some vines up the side of your house or along your fence. Try to create lush, wild growth in a few places to simulate a natural environment. You might attract cavity-nesting birds by putting up a nest box (see BirdNotes: *Selecting a Nest Box*).

You should be able to find some excellent plants for your garden in a nursery—either local or mail order. Do check to make sure that the plants you select are hardy and native to your region.

Plan Ahead

When you're designing your yard, consider how large each plant will be when it matures. Remember that a lovely little tree that you plant today may become a giant behemoth that hogs your entire yard in a few years.

Before you start digging up plants and rearranging your yard, you'll want to try out your garden design on paper. Draw a map of your property, showing the location of your house and all the trees and other major plants.
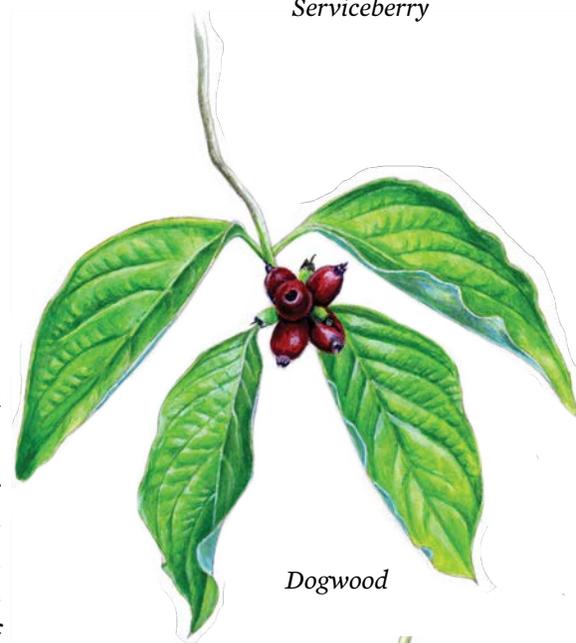
Then place a sheet of thin tracing paper over the map and draw your redesigned garden, indicating where each new plant will go.

Avoid straight lines or rows in your plantings. Create a meandering line where two kinds of habitat, such as shrubs and lawn, meet. These edge areas provide the widest variety of perching places, nest sites, and food types. Develop secluded areas of shrubs, conifers, and mixed plantings. Take note of the areas in your yard that receive sun or shade, and choose only plants that are appropriate for each lighting situation. Leave dead limbs and even entire dead trees where they are (unless they're dangerous to people or property). The insects tunneling under the bark are an important food source for birds such as chickadees, woodpeckers, and nuthatches.

Furthermore, old hollow trees are becoming increasingly scarce, and are often taken by nonnative species such

Serviceberry

Dogwood

Wild Grape

Bird-friendly Plants

Check with your nursery to make sure that the plant species you select are native to your area.

Deciduous Trees

Mulberries (*Morus* species*)* The berries produced by these trees in July and August are a favorite food of more than 40 bird species. These wide-spreading, medium-sized trees grow 30 to 60 feet tall.

Dogwoods (*Cornus florida* and other species) An excellent choice for birds *and* people, this well-known ornamental tree is covered with white, pink, or red flowers in spring and red fruits (birds love them) from August to November. Grows up to 40 feet tall.

Crab Apples (*Malus* species) Many bird species eat the flower buds, flowers, fruit, and seeds of these trees, which also provide good cover and nest sites. Usually grows to about 20 feet tall.

Serviceberries (*Amelanchier* species)These are medium-sized trees, 25 to 60 feet tall, that grow masses of white or pinkish flowers in spring. Fruits appear in the summer.

Coniferous Trees

Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) An attractive cone-shaped tree, offering cover, nest sites, and winter fruit for birds. Usually grows 50 to 90 feet tall.

Spruces (*Picea* species) The cones of these trees produce seeds that birds eat in fall and winter. Spruces also provide cover and nest sites. They may grow up to 150 feet tall.

Shrubs and Vines

Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*) This shrub has brilliant red fall foliage and clusters of hairy red fruit that persist throughout winter and are eaten by many bird species.

Northern Bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*) This semi-evergreen shrub grows berries which stay on the plant year-round and are a preferred food of Tree Swallows, catbirds, bluebirds, and many other birds.

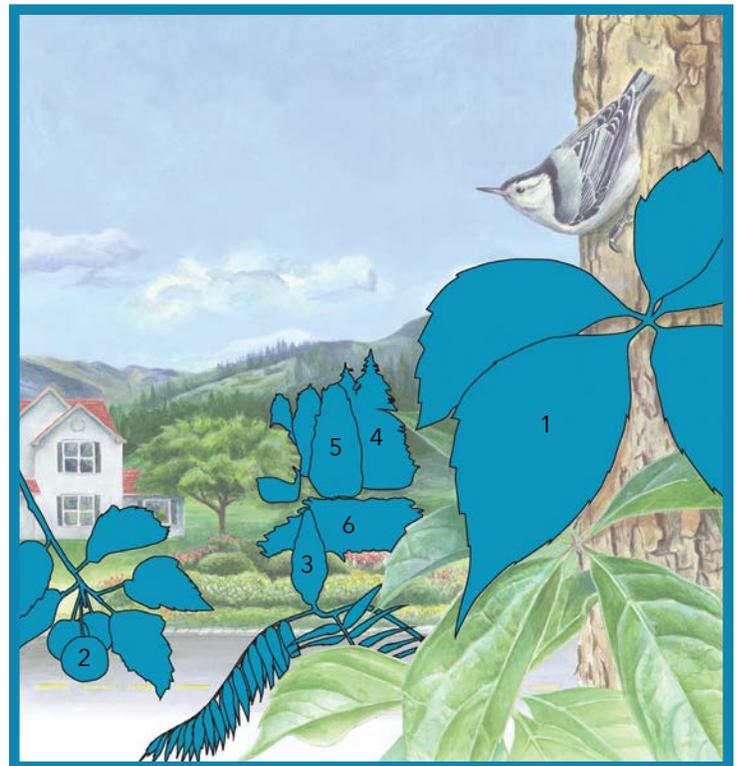**Viburnums** (*Viburnum* species) A large genus of easy-to-grow shrubs with white flowers in spring, followed by red, yellow, blue, or black berries. Birds eat the berries and find cover in the branches.

Virginia Creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) A tree-climbing vine that produces small blue berries from August to February.

Wild Grapes (*Vitis* species) These climbing vines provide superb fruit, eaten by more than 50 bird species. The vines also provide excellent cover and nest sites.

Herbaceous Plants

An herbaceous plant has flowers as well as soft, green stems instead of woody branches. They can be annual, biennial, or perennial. The best herbaceous plants for birds produce edible seeds. For example, it's hard to go wrong with sunflowers which produce large seeds with lots of fat content and most birds love them. If you are hoping to attract hummingbirds, go for colorful, tubular flowers, such as salvia, foxglove, morning glory or bee balm. You'll probably attract some butterflies, too!

Mulberry

Northern Bayberry

Plants shown on front cover

1. Virginia Creeper	*4. Spruce*
2. Crab Apple	*5. Red Cedar*
3. Staghorn Sumac	*6. Viburnum*

as European Starlings and House Sparrows. Native cavity-nesters, such as bluebirds and woodpeckers, are having an increasingly difficult time finding nest sites. A dead tree can look attractive in a garden, particularly if it has ivy growing up its trunk.

Use dead branches that fall from your trees to start a brush pile. It will afford protection to the birds from harsh weather and predators. To start your brush pile, lay down some thick branches about two feet deep, then add a few feet of thinner branches on top. Over that, add some thin conifer branches.

With a little time and effort, you can easily turn your yard into a welcome haven for local and migrant songbirds.

The illustrations in this issue of *BirdNotes* were created by Reyn Ojiri, a Bartels Science Illustration Intern. Please visit www.birds.cornell.edu/artinterns to learn more about the Cornell Lab's art internship program, or visit www.reynojiri.com to see more of Reyn's work.

American Goldfinch on lemon queen sunflowers.