



# Bird-Friendly Winter Gardens

For birds that take winter residence in your garden, the right mix of plants creates a habitat that can help ensure their survival.

BY KRIS WETHERBEE

Left undisturbed in the garden, the seedheads of various perennials and ornamental grasses provide sustenance for many birds in winter.

**W**HEN IT comes to food and shelter, winter holds no worries for most humans, who can make a quick trip to the supermarket or turn up the thermostat. But for backyard birds, winter can be challenging as finding food proves more difficult and shelter becomes scarcer.

Shorter days mean less time for birds to forage. Tasty insects are off the menu in much of the country because most hibernate and are well hidden. Many seed-bearing plants have been consumed; others have been cleaned up at season's end or are covered in snow. The selection of fruits and berries has dwindled. What's more, deciduous trees and shrubs leave little shelter to protect resident songbirds facing the winter elements and hungry predators.

But with a little planning, you can keep winter birds healthy and happy by creating a habitat that provides them with a few basic needs—food, water, shelter, and a safe place to raise a family come spring. Designing a landscape with a multi-layered canopy of evergreen and deciduous plants accommodates the preferences of different birds with everything they need.

A bird's food preferences vary among species, the location, and time of year. So do their preferences for shelter and nesting sites. Towhees and juncos, for example, are ground-feeders and nearly always nest beneath bushes. Nuthatches prefer the sanctuary of trees, where they nest and feed on tree seeds and insects found on and under bark. And cardinals feed mainly on the ground but nest in the dense growth of shrubs. (For a list of plants that provide for birds in winter, see "Bird Feeders with Roots," page 26.)

## BERRY BUFFET

"Many birds that eat insects during the breeding season switch to a more omnivorous diet in the wintertime and eat a lot of fruit," says ornithologist David Bontler, director of citizen science for Project FeederWatch at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, New York. Shrubs and trees that hang on to their fruit through winter are particularly valuable—especially when their berries or fruit are high in fats. Birds must consume a lot of calories derived from fat in winter to help them maintain the body temperature needed for their survival.



In winter, non-migratory insect-eating and seed-eating birds often must supplement their diet with berries and fruits from plants such as purple chokeberry (*Aronia x prunifolia*), top, and American bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*), above left. Above right: A black-capped chickadee dines on the fruit of a female staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*).

Offer a high-fat buffet that includes berry-laden trees and shrubs such as bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*), sassafras, magnolia, and dogwood (*Cornus* spp.). Many plants retain fruits into winter, when cold weather softens and sweetens the fruits so they are more palatable for birds. Examples include hawthorn (*Crataegus* spp.), sumac (*Rhus* spp.), chokeberry (*Aronia* spp.), American bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*), juniper (*Juniperus* spp.), Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*), and crabapple (*Malus* spp.). Some hollies (*Ilex* spp.) produce berries that can sustain birds into early spring.

### SEEDED SPECIALS

Many of our winter birds, such as chickadees, sparrows, and finches, are seed eaters. And some insect-eaters also rely more on seeds as winter sets in. An assortment of perennials and annuals offers a good source of the seeds they love.



The cones of Sitka spruce, above, contain winged seeds. Top right: The seeds of purple coneflower are favored by many species, including goldfinches. Right: Needle grass is a food source for ground-dwelling birds.



You can help ensure a seed feast by allowing spent flowers to remain at season's end so the seeds can mature. Many seed-bearing perennials such as coneflowers (*Echinacea* spp.), tickseed (*Coreopsis* spp.), penstemons, and sedums (*Hylotelephium* spp.) are easy to grow and require minimal maintenance because they are drought-tolerant once established.

The seedheads on many grasses are a major source of food for a variety of birds, particularly in the Southwest, where lots of grassland species migrate for winter. "This group of birds has experienced a greater decline over the past half century than any other group of birds in the U.S.," says ornithologist Charles van Riper III of the University of Arizona in Tucson. He

suggests allowing grasses such as needle grass (*Nassella* spp.) to remain through winter to attract and sustain the grassland birds that depend on the seeds.

Shrubs and trees also feed hungry chickadees, grosbeaks, and other birds. Maples (*Acer* spp.) have winged seeds; spruces (*Picea* spp.) are beautifully adorned with colorful and pendulous seeded cones; red-

buds (*Cercis* spp.) attract many birds with beanlike pods that persist into winter.

## SUPPLEMENTING THE FEAST

Birds can lose seven to 15 percent of their body weight just trying to keep warm on cold winter nights, so well-stocked feeders are an important supplement to your garden's offerings. Look for a bird feeder that is sturdy enough to withstand winter weather and also keeps seeds dry. Bear in mind that a variety of seed-filled feeders placed at different heights will attract more bird species than one feeder featuring just one type of seed.

A wide range of styles is available to accommodate birds with varying eating habits. Tray or platform feeders are designed with an edge around the bottom to keep seeds from spilling out. They accommodate a wide variety of backyard birds. Place these feeders one to three feet above the ground and ground-feeders such as juncos, towhees, chickadees, and mourning doves will flock to them.

Hopper feeders can be hung from a tree or mounted on a pole. They come equipped with hoppers or perches on the sides and are available in many shapes and sizes. These feeders attract the widest variety of seed-eating birds, including grosbeaks, cardinals, and jays.



A seed-filled feeder provides a supplemental food source for birds in a snow-covered garden.

## GETTING INVOLVED IN BIRD CONSERVATION



Count the birds in your own backyard and take part in bird conservation worldwide. The **Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC)**, a joint project of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society, is an annual four-day event in February that involves people of all levels of birding experience and expertise. Last year, an estimated 192,456 participants recorded sighting 6,310 bird species and over 28 million individual birds throughout the world. Visit [www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org) to find out how you can participate.

**Project FeederWatch** is a North American study of birds that visit backyard feeders, nature centers, and other locales. Participants in the winter-long program—operated by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Bird Studies Canada—help scientists track movements of winter bird populations and long term trends in the distribution and population of birds. Anyone with an interest in birds can participate. Visit [www.feederwatch.org](http://www.feederwatch.org) for more information.

—K.W.

Suspended tube feeders—long, cylindrical units with feeding ports and perches—are favored by smaller birds such as finches, siskins, redpolls, and nuthatches. Specialty tube feeders designed with smaller openings can be filled with Nyjer seed—a seed highly favored by the finch family.

Providing supplemental seeds for birds will not affect their migration habits. “Migration is triggered by changes in photoperiod or day length,” says Bonter. “You can offer an amazing smorgasbord of food in your backyard, but when it comes time for migrating birds to move on, they will.”

## UNDER COVER

Shelter plants range from low-growing shrubs for ground-feeding birds to tall trees for a variety of birds. Although dense deciduous trees, shrubs, and vines provide a place where birds can nest or take cover from predators or stormy weather, broad-

leaf and coniferous evergreens are essential in the winter garden. The scalelike foliage of junipers and arborvitae (*Thuja* spp.) and the needles of spruce (*Picea* spp.), hemlocks (*Tsuga* spp.), and pines (*Pinus* spp.) offer birds year-round shelter. Mixing in broadleaf evergreens such as American holly (*Ilex opaca*), rhododendron, pyracantha, box honeysuckle (*Lonicera nitida*), and evergreen cotoneaster also adds color and texture.

If space allows, create a hedgerow of mixed evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs such as witch hazel (*Hamamelis* spp.), holly, mountain ash (*Sorbus* spp.), trailing blackberry (*Rubus* spp.), viburnum, and juniper, using three to five of a kind. Many of these plants also bear edible fruit.

“The native cholla (*Cylindropuntia* spp.), especially when large, serves as a focal point for birds in the Southwest,” says van Riper. He suggests that gardeners retain

## BIRD FEEDERS WITH ROOTS

These bird-friendly plants and trees serve up a smorgasbord of wintertime seeds and berries favored by birds. Many of these plants also provide a place where birds can hide from predators or take cover from harsh weather. A new study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* reveals that inclusion of at least 70 percent native plants in gardens is critical for supporting sustainable populations of insect-eating birds. For some regionally specific plant suggestions, check out the National Audubon Society web page ([www.audubon.org/bird/at\\_home/PlantsCommon.html](http://www.audubon.org/bird/at_home/PlantsCommon.html)) and the National Wildlife Federation plant finder ([www.nwf.org/NativePlantFinder](http://www.nwf.org/NativePlantFinder)). —K.W.

PLANT	BIRDS ATTRACTED	COMMENTS
<b>ANNUALS</b>		
Cosmos ( <i>Cosmos</i> spp.)	Juncos, finches, sparrows, and buntings	Seedheads provide food in late fall and winter; flowers provide nectar for hummingbirds from summer to fall
Sunflowers ( <i>Helianthus</i> spp.)	Cardinals, finches, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, and juncos	Prolific seed producer; offers a high-fat/high-energy food source
Zinnias ( <i>Zinnia</i> spp.)	Finches, chickadees, titmice, and sparrows	Nectar-rich blooms attract hummingbirds and continue into late fall
<b>PERENNIALS</b>		
Asters ( <i>Symphyotrichum</i> , <i>Eurybia</i> , <i>Oligoneuron</i> spp.)	Cardinals, goldfinches, chickadees, nuthatches, and towhees	Nectar-rich flowers in late summer and fall, followed by seedheads in fall and winter
Coneflowers ( <i>Echinacea</i> spp.)	Finches, chickadees, nuthatches, towhees, and other seed-eaters	Summer flowers followed by orange-brown cones that darken as seeds mature; seedheads hang on into winter
Sedums ( <i>Hylotelephium</i> spp.)	Finches, chickadees, grosbeaks, siskins, and other seed-eaters	Nectar-rich flowers appeal to hummingbirds; upright types, such as ‘Autumn Joy’, offer abundant seeds
<b>VINES &amp; GROUNDCOVERS</b>		
Kinnikinnick ( <i>Arctostaphylos</i> <i>uva-ursi</i> )	Ground-feeding birds, including sparrows and towhees	Evergreen groundcover with fall berries that persist into winter
Virginia creeper ( <i>Parthenocissus</i> <i>quinquefolia</i> )	Warblers, robins, thrushes, bluebirds, vireos, cardinals, and woodpeckers	Fall fruits persist into winter; provides seasonal shelter and nesting sites
<b>SHRUBS</b>		
Cotoneasters ( <i>Cotoneaster</i> spp.)	Towhees, robins, mockingbirds, waxwings, and finches	Evergreen, semi-evergreen, or deciduous shrubs with late summer to autumn berries remaining through winter; nectar-rich flowers appeal to hummingbirds; provides shelter and nesting sites
Spruces ( <i>Picea</i> spp.)	Grosbeaks, chickadees, woodpeckers, and nuthatches	Evergreen, coniferous trees and shrubs produce seed-bearing cones and offer year-round shelter and nesting sites
Viburnums ( <i>Viburnum</i> spp.)	Woodpeckers, mockingbirds, finches, bluebirds, robins, grosbeaks, and thrushes	Deciduous and evergreen shrubs provide nest sites and cover; summer and fall fruit sometimes persist into winter, depending on the species
<b>TREES</b>		
Eastern juniper ( <i>Juniperus</i> <i>virginiana</i> )	Cedar waxwings, robins, finches, flickers, warblers, grosbeaks, and bluebirds	Evergreen provides shelter and nesting sites; fall fruits persist into winter
Dogwoods ( <i>Cornus</i> spp.)	Robins, bluebirds, vireos, juncos, cardinals, warblers, and towhees	Late summer to fall berries remain through winter; high-fat berries are an important food source for migrating birds
Hollies ( <i>Ilex</i> spp.)	Fruit-eating birds, including bluebirds, robins, waxwings, finches, and woodpeckers	Evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs with fall fruits that last into early spring; great for nesting sites and shelter, especially in winter



Native to North America, eastern hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*) has fine-needled evergreen boughs that a wide variety of birds rely on year-round for shelter and nesting.

some of these in their landscapes, “as this plant is a favorite nesting location, providing protection from the many nest predators found throughout the Southwest.”

### DON'T FORGET WATER

When it comes to attracting birds, water is a powerful magnet. Birds need access

to water year-round, but a dependable fresh water source can be especially hard to find in winter.

A heated birdbath is a great way to attract birds to the winter garden. You can also keep water from freezing in an existing birdbath by adding a submersible, thermostatically-controlled water heater

## Resources

### Attracting Birds, Butterflies & Other Winged Wonders to Your Backyard

by Kris Wetherbee. Lark Books, Asheville, North Carolina, 2006.

### Bird-by-Bird Gardening

by Sally Roth. Rodale Press, Emmaus, Pennsylvania, 2009.

### Bird Studies Canada,

[www.bsc-eoc.org](http://www.bsc-eoc.org).

### Cornell Lab of Ornithology,

[www.birds.cornell.edu](http://www.birds.cornell.edu).

### Gardening for the Birds

by George Adams. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2013.

### National Audubon Society,

[www.audubon.org/birds](http://www.audubon.org/birds).

### National Wildlife Federation,

[www.nwf.org](http://www.nwf.org).

### Project FeederWatch,


[www.feederwatch.org](http://www.feederwatch.org).



The autumn fruits of 'Scarlett O'Hara' winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) persist through winter.

specifically designed for outdoor birdbaths. Birdbaths offer a quick and easy way to provide water at any time of year, but even a shallow waterproof container such as a glazed plant saucer or rock with a natural depression will work as long as you keep it clean and filled.

Consider the placement of your birdbaths carefully, cautions van Riper. “Be careful that you do not set up ‘death traps’ where the water is neatly hidden in the vegetation and predators wait in ambush for the birds. Either utilize elevated water birdbaths or pans on the ground, but all in the open.”

A bird-friendly winter garden needn't be large to be effective. You can start with a few trees, shrubs, and perennials, accented with bird feeders, nest boxes, and birdbaths. An area as little as 10 by 10 feet, such as a large flower bed, a border of mixed shrubs, or even the planted edge of a deck or patio, can help increase the bird population in your yard. Of course, the larger the habitat, the more birds you'll attract—and the greater the rewards for all. 

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