

1997

G97-1331 Backyard Wildlife *To Feed A Hummingbird*

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Johnson, Ron J. and Steinegger, Donald H., "G97-1331 Backyard Wildlife *To Feed A Hummingbird*" (1997). *Historical Materials from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension*. 1519.

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Backyard Wildlife *To Feed A Hummingbird*

The sixth in the backyard wildlife series, this NebGuide describes plants and nectar feeding for attracting hummingbirds to your backyard in Nebraska.

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Four species of hummingbirds are found in Nebraska, one in the east and three in the west. Ruby-throated hummingbirds migrate through eastern Nebraska in spring and fall, and some nest here, mostly along the Missouri river valley. Typically, ruby-throat migration in Nebraska peaks about May 5-17 and September 2-18, but northward migration may occur from April to June and southward flights from August to early October. Broad-tailed and rufous hummingbirds are seen in the Nebraska panhandle during fall migration from late July to early September with most sightings in early to mid-August. Calliope hummingbirds are seen rarely in the panhandle area. These four hummingbird species spend winter in Mexico and Central America.

What They Eat

The natural diet of hummers is flower nectar, tree sap, and small insects and spiders that are often captured in or near flowers. This natural diet can be supplemented by hummingbird feeders, which dispense a sugar water solution. Flowers blooming through the season, however, are needed when hummingbirds are present to attract them and to provide the natural foods required for a complete diet.

Planting for Hummingbirds

Table I lists recommended herbaceous plants that can provide a variety of flowers for hummingbirds

when they are present in your rural or urban community. These landscape plants provide beauty as well as a natural foraging area where hummingbirds can find both flower nectar and small insects to eat. Select plants that provide flowers throughout the season, especially at times when you expect hummingbirds. Include red varieties of the plants listed because red tubular flowers appear to be especially attractive to hummingbirds. Some of the plants listed occur both as wildflowers and as cultivated varieties. Where these wildflowers are growing naturally, maintaining them can benefit hummingbirds. For planting, check with nurseries for availability of either wildflowers or cultivated varieties.



Flowers add beauty and a place where hummingbirds can find both flower nectar and insects to eat.

Trees and shrubs form the framework of your landscape and these also can benefit hummingbirds. Common flowering shrubs favored by hummingbirds include Coralberry (*Symphoricarpos orbiculatus* and other species), Weigela (*Weigela florida*), and Rose-of-Sharon (*Hibiscus syriacus*). Other shrubs used include Honeysuckle (*Lonicera* spp.), Beauty Bush (*Kolkwitzia amabilis*), Currant (*Ribes odoratum*), and Gooseberry (*Ribes speciosum*). Trees used by hummingbirds include Flowering Crab (*Malus* spp.), Hawthorne (*Crataegus* spp.), Horsechestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), Tuliptree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), and Black Locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*). In maintaining flowering plants, it's best to avoid insecticide use around the flowers, because hummingbirds depend on small insects as part of their diet.

Nectar Feeding

Commercial "nectar" solutions for hummingbirds can be purchased or easily made by mixing one part granulated white sugar (common table variety) with four parts water. For example, mix 1/4 cup sugar with one cup water. Boil the water, dissolve the sugar, then allow to cool before filling the feeder. Keep leftover portions refrigerated until needed. Change the mix every few days, more often in hot weather, and clean the feeder each time before refilling to prevent molds that can harm the birds.



Feeders can be cleaned by either rinsing with hot water, filling with vinegar and uncooked rice and shaking vigorously, or soaking the feeder in a solution of two ounces household bleach mixed with one gallon of water. A stiff bottle brush may help but avoid soaps because residues may interfere with the capillary action of the feeder.

When selecting a hummingbird feeder, look for one that's easy to fill and clean and without too many nooks and crannies. Some red on the feeder is desirable because it seems to attract hummingbirds, and bee guards (grids or screens) over the feeding ports help discourage bees. Hang the feeder from a tree branch or on a deck or porch, preferably in partial shade, near flowers, and out of the wind. Consider using more than one feeder to prevent an aggressive male hummingbird from dominating and to add viewing opportunities. For example, place a feeder near your hummingbird flowers and another closer to your home or viewing

windows. Place feeders out in time for expected arrivals and continue until hummingbirds migrate on.

More Feeding Tips

Avoid honey mixtures for feeding because there is increased potential for spoilage and harmful molds. Also, avoid red food coloring; the red tip or plastic flower on the feeding spout is sufficient and there is some concern that the food coloring might be harmful. If your feeder doesn't have red, you can add a red plastic flower, red ribbon, red tape, or even red nail polish on the surface of feeding ports. To prevent ants from coming to the feeder, keep the outside clean and, if needed, coat the feeder hanger or the spout with salad oil or petroleum jelly. To deter bees, some feeders have bee guards, and another possible approach is to repel bees by rubbing Avon Skin-so-soft® or Off Skintastic® onto the feeder surface by the feeder ports.

To help attract small insects eaten by hummingbirds, hang an overripe banana peel or cantaloupe near the feeder; a mesh produce sack makes a convenient holder. Finally, to benefit hummingbirds, use all pesticides wisely and only when needed. And minimize insecticide use, especially around flowers, because hummingbirds depend on small insects as part of their diet.

Table I. Herbaceous plants that attract hummingbirds

Plants	Sun Exposure	Moisture Preference	Flowering Time	Comments
Rose-of-Sharon <i>Hibiscus syriacus</i>	Full sun to partial shade	Moist; well-drained	Late summer to early fall	Perennial shrub that may die back to the ground each year.
American columbine <i>Aquilegia</i> hybrids	Full sun to partial shade	Moist; well-drained	Late spring to early summer	Short-lived herbaceous perennial. In full sun locations, protect from hot afternoon sun.
Bee balm (Oswego tea, or Scarlet bergamot) <i>Monarda didyma</i>	Full sun	Moist	Summer	Herbaceous perennial. Many cultivars - select powdery mildew resistant types. Remove faded flowers (dead head). Not drought tolerant.
Blazing stars <i>Liatris</i> spp.	Full sun or light shade	Moist; well-drained	Midsummer to late fall	Perennial. Several species and cultivars available.
Butterfly-bush <i>Buddleia davidii</i>	Full sun	Moist; well-drained; cool	Early summer	Behaves as a herbaceous perennial in our climate. Many cultivars.
Clematis <i>Clematis</i> × <i>jackmanii</i> and other species	East exposure; sun	Moist; well-drained; cool soil	Early summer	Perennial. Many cultivars - some natives; mulch soil to keep cool; avoid hot afternoon sun.
Coral bells <i>Heuchera sanguinea</i>	Sun to partial shade	Moist; well-drained	Late spring	Herbaceous perennial; Needs high organic soils - avoid clay
Daylily <i>Hemerocallis</i> spp. and hybrids	Sun to partial shade	Moist to dry, well-drained	Late spring to summer	Herbaceous perennial. Many hybrids - use different hybrids and species to obtain season long bloom.
Foxglove <i>Digitalis purpurea</i>	Semi-shade	Moist; well-drained	Spring	Biennial; self-sows and maintains itself.
Garden phlox (Perennial phlox) <i>Phlox paniculata</i>	Sun	Moist; well-drained	Summer	Herbaceous perennial. Requires site with good air movement; avoid overhead watering, or water in early morning; many cultivars; mildew a serious problem.

Gladiolas <i>Gladiolus</i> spp.	Sun	Moist; well-drained	Summer	Perennial, but store corm indoors over winter; protect from wind
Hardy fuchsia <i>Fuchsia riccartoni</i>	Sun in morning; shade in afternoon	Moist; well-drained	Summer, fall	Not hardy in Nebraska; grow in a container and bring indoors in winter.
Hollyhock <i>Alcea Rosea (Althaea rosa)</i>	Sun	Moist; well-drained	Summer, fall	Biennial. Self-sows; maintains single flower type
Honeysuckle Trumpet <i>Lonicera sempervirens</i> and hybrids such as Brown's honeysuckle.	Sun to shade	Moist; well-drained	Spring; sparsely thereafter	Perennial vine.
Hosta <i>Hosta</i> spp.	Semi-shade	Moist; well-drained	Early summer to late summer	Herbaceous perennial.
Moss pink <i>Phlox subulata</i>	Full sun	Moist; well-drained	Early spring	Herbaceous perennial.
Nasturtium <i>Tropaeolum</i> spp.	Sun; avoid hot sites	Dry, low N soils	Summer, fall	Annual.
Penstemon <i>Penstemon gloxinoides</i> and other species	Sun	Dry; well-drained	Spring to summer	Herbaceous perennial.
Petunia <i>Petunia × hybrida</i>	Full sun	Well-drained	Summer to frost	Annual.
Salvia or sage (red and others) <i>Salvia splendens</i> and others	Sun to light shade	Moist; well-drained	Spring to frost	Annual to herbaceous perennial. Tolerates some moisture stress, but with reduced flowering.
Flowering tobacco <i>Nicotiana glauca</i>	Full sun to partial shade	Moist; well-drained	Summer, fall	Annual.
Scarlet runner pole bean <i>Phaseolus coccineus</i>	Sun	Well-drained	Summer	Annual vine.
Scarlet trumpet creeper <i>Campsis radicans</i>	Sun	Well-drained	Summer	Annual vine.
Wild blue phlox <i>Phlox divaricata</i>	Shade	Moist; well-drained	Spring	Herbaceous perennial.
Zinnias <i>Zinnia elegans</i>	Full sun	Well-drained	Summer, fall	Annual.

For More Information

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Acknowledgments

Special thanks to M. M. Beck, J. J. Dinan, and D. K. Titterington for reviewing an earlier draft and offering helpful suggestions, M. A. Brogie, T. E. Labeledz, and P. A. Johnsgard for advice on specific portions and René Lanik for illustrations.

File G1331 under: WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

D-5, Urban Wildlife

Issued May 1997; 2,500 printed.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Elbert C. Dickey, Director of Cooperative Extension, University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

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