

Grow Native 🍷 Massachusetts

Every garden matters ~ Every landscape counts



Gardening is for the Birds:

Tips for Creating Bird-friendly Habitat

1. Emphasize Native Plantings to Provide Food

- Many natives provide fruit through berries and seeds—and it's great fun to watch the birds eat them. Plant lots of variety. There are references to suggest which plants will attract certain species of birds. But do take these with a grain of salt, as the information given is not always complete. Make your own observations; you will learn a lot.
- Native plants are essential hosts to healthy insect populations, making them especially important. In the big picture, over one-half of the diet of songbirds is comprised of insects. In addition, nestlings that are growing fast, and soon to fledge, eat only insects. So an abundance of native plants is required to host the insects that are essential to bird life. Non-native plants do not as readily serve as hosts for insects, and therefore predominantly non-native gardens have much less biodiversity, including birds or butterflies.

2. Vertical Edge—TREES are VERY important

- Birds fly, and they need lots of different levels—tall trees, medium size trees, high and low shrubs, and groundcover. The more variety the better; different bird species rely on different layers.
- Tall trees are especially important in urban and suburban neighborhoods, to create some approximation of a continuous woodland environment in which birds can flit from tree to tree. (Notice what happens when there are no tall trees around... do you see many birds?)

3. Birds Need Water, Too

- They need water they can splash and bathe in, so shallowness is important. Therefore, if you create a fancy water feature, make sure it has shallow spots and a range of depths.
- A simple bird bath worked into the landscape can work well. Change the water regularly, but don't worry about keeping it pristine—a few leaves and insects around can add to its usefulness.

4. Provide Cover for Nesting and Foraging

- One of the biggest needs for birds in our urban and suburban areas is adequate “cover” for nesting and privacy. Consider where you see birds, and notice that they like dark, wooded, or private areas for nesting, feeding, etc. Evergreen trees are especially great for this.
- Windbreaks—masses of plantings large enough to slow the wind—are important for creating protection.
- Shrubby hedgerows, even if not wide, can provide important habitat. An understory of twigs and leaf litter will contain insects and seeds, while offering shelter.

5. Leave Your Leaf Litter in the Garden

- Leaf litter is home to a tremendous amount of life— especially arthropods (insects, spiders) and mollusks (snails). All of these are important bird food, especially to our ground feeding birds, which are often the species in decline because of the tremendous loss of ground level habitat and food sources. If you leave the leaves, you will start to see many more birds happily feeding!
- Many butterflies, moths, and native bees depend on leaf litter for overwintering or reproduction, and you entire garden food web will function much better with its soil ecosystem intact.
- A big bonus: Leaf litter is the best mulch you can get, and you don't have to buy it or ship it in.

5. Snags or Dead Trees

- Think about “the woods.” Dead trees are important for food and habitat. They are host to insect populations and especially loved by woodpecker species. They will also be used to create nesting holes. Consider letting dead trees stand if they are away from structures, or you can create a snag by cutting down part of a tree and leaving the trunk.

6. Say “No to Pesticides!”

- Bald eagle populations have recovered dramatically since the banning of DDT, sufficiently so that in 2007 they were delisted as a threatened and endangered species in the United States. This is one great example of what happens when we remove pesticides from the food web.
- But other, still legal, pesticides are used routinely and quite dangerous too. Rodenticides used to kill rats and small mammals get passed up the food chain to owls, hawks and other predators, killing many. Spraying pesticides kills the insects that birds depend on to survive, and can also have a direct effect on birds that come into contact with these poisons.

7. Eliminate Unnecessary Predators—Don't Let Your Pets Kill or Harass Wildlife

- Predation by cats is a serious threat to our native songbird populations and a very significant cause of human-induced bird mortality (along with large plate glass windows and tall skyscrapers). If you have a cat, keep it inside.
- Dogs often disrupt bird visitation by chasing them or scaring them off. Keep them in more confined areas, under control, and/or on a leash.

8. More Fun: Stones in the Garden are More Than Aesthetic Additions

- Create a dust bath of 1/3 each sand, loam, and sifted ash... some birds “bathe” in these to rid themselves of parasites. Associate it with stones to give birds a perching spot.
- Create perches with stones and stone walls. Birds love to hop from spot to spot. Stone walls might also come to harbor other amphibians or mammals that enliven your landscape.