

FEEDING BIRDS IN WINTER AND BEYOND

We talked about feeding our birds last month from the wide array of seeds available, so we are continuing this month to look at ways to attract birds with native plant materials.

Winter weather provides a wonderful time to look out our windows and watch the birds come to our feeders. It is also a good time to take advantage of the colder temps to stay inside and consider what we can plant for birds and other wildlife. We will look at a few native plants that grow well in our area and the insects that have evolved alongside these plants and the birds who eat them! Isn't it amazing that the insects who choose to feed upon native plants are the same insects that birds need to eat and feed to their offspring?

It is easiest to begin to add native plants to our yards as other plants need to be replaced due to the fact they are not thriving and to fulfill our desire to add more beauty and diversity. What can be better than to provide plant materials who not only attract beneficial insects and sometimes function as host plants, but also provide flowers with ample nectar and even fruit! So, here we go.....

An all-time favorite is the American Holly (*Ilex opaca*), or commonly called the White, Prickly or Christmas Holly. It is a slow growing pyramidal evergreen that requires both a male and female to form its scrumptious red berries. It can grow to 30' tall

and makes an attractive wind-block or privacy screen. The berries are eaten by a wide variety of birds and can grow in sun or shade in well-drained soil. It is a long-lived holly.

A smaller deciduous 3-5' shrub is the American Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*). Commonly called the French Mulberry, this shrub has attractive yellowish green foliage and small pink flowers in late spring and early summer. During fall and winter waxwings, wrens, chickadees, and titmice are attracted to its bright glossy purple fruit which forms at the leaf axils. It can grow in sun or partial shade and afternoon shade is preferred.

Next is the American Basswood (*Tilia americana*), or the American Linden or Bee Tree as it is commonly called. It boasts very early yellow flowers which are inconspicuous but fragrant and supplies nutritious nectar to early season bees and other beneficial insects. Considered a medium growth tree (growth rate of 12-24"/year) it can grow up to 30' tall. Jays, vireos, chickadees, titmice, woodpeckers, cardinals, and waxwings are attracted to the insects on this tree, and they also use it for sheltering.

The Elderberry (*Sambucus* sp.) is a shrub or small tree that has white blossoms in spring and black or dark purple berries in mid-August through mid-September. Elderberries grow in well-drained soil in full sun. Berries are numerous and desired by wildlife and well as the gardeners who planted it.

Chokeberry (*Aronia*) is a deciduous shrub that can reach 3-8' tall and tolerates wet soil. It sometimes demonstrates some

suckering in wet areas but is not invasive. Spring brings white flowers, and, in the fall, leaves turn from green to red to purple. Chokeberries tolerate wet soils and produce fruit in late summer and autumn.

Finally, an all-time favorite is the Possumhaw (*Ilex decidua*). This small tree or shrub grows to 15-20' tall in any kind of soil and is considered a full sun or understory tree. It is often called the Possumhaw Holly, Bearberry, or Winterberry. It is dioecious with red persistent berries throughout autumn and winter on the female plant. The leaves are oval and toothed, and sport a dark glossy green until turning yellow in autumn. It is also drought and cold tolerant. Robins love Possumhaws that are loaded with berries. While they prefer fruit and worms, they have been known to absolutely cover a Possumhaw, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, just to feast on the berries.

Water, too, is essential in the cold for birds. Dehydration due to lack of water can be fatal. Also, birds bathe their feathers to keep them clean, plus it gives them the ability to fluff up to keep themselves warm which directly affects their ability to survive.