

BERRIES FOR BIRDS

From an article in the Santa Clara Valley Chapter's newsletter

One of the best ways to watch birds is to find native plants laden with ripe fruits of the sorts they love to eat. They often come out in the open to feed, and when there is plenty of good food they seem more at ease with human presence, or at least much less likely to fly far away.

A very satisfying way to enjoy birds is to plant native plants which provide food for them. Many berrying plants, both native and non-native, attract birds. But native berries attract a greater diversity of songbirds and often greater numbers as well. The flowers, foliage, leaf litter, etc. of native species also support a greater diversity and abundance of invertebrates upon which the birds will feed year round.

Some good berrying species:

***Berberis* spp., Mahonia or Oregon Grape:**

These are easy to grow and quite decorative, with bright yellow flowers followed by blue or red berries, and popular with many birds.

***Heteromeles arbutifolia*, Toyon:** The bright red berries are the favorite food of robins and waxwings in winter, and more than 20 other species of birds utilize them for food. In its season no berry is more attractive. Purple finches (seed predators) rip open the fruits to get at the seeds, even though the seeds contain a small percentage of cyanide compounds. Birds do not get "drunk" on toyon as they do with the non-native pyracantha. Toyon is very easy to grow. Give it enough room so that little or no pruning will be required. Its white flowers in early summer attract many bees and a wide variety of very interesting insects.

***Prunus ilicifolia*, Hollyleaf Cherry:** This popular landscaping subject provides good bird food. The seeds may be planted where the plants are wanted. They can be planted as screens along property lines. They can be severely hedged, but it is best to allow them to grow at least 6 feet tall, or better yet, give them plenty of room to develop as specimens. For maximum value to birds allow them to be branched to the ground and allow litter to accumulate.

***Rhamnus californica*, California**

Coffeeberry: This shrub is particularly useful because it provides succulent berries in early fall. Many birds visit it year round for insects. It is an attractive foliage plant, easy to cultivate and fast-growing.

***Sambucus mexicana*, Mexican Elderberry:**

This is a common riparian species, sometimes found at the base of hills or in ravines. It fruits in early summer, attracting an extremely wide range of birds, such as quail, thrashers, grosbeaks, woodpeckers, orioles, house finches, and orange-crowned warblers. It is very easy to cultivate. It does tend to get large and can be rangy, but responds well to pruning. It can be cut to the ground every year (or whenever it gets too big) during the dormant season in late summer, and it will still grow up to flower and set fruit the next year.

***Toxicodendron diversilobum*, Poison Oak:**

The fruits are attractive to birds that normally eat mast or insects, such as jays, woodpeckers, titmice, hermit thrushes and wrentits. It is an important food for many birds. Poison oak is not as hard to live with as one may think. Obviously it's wise to clear it away from trails or heavily used areas; nuisance seedlings can be dealt with conveniently and safely with a weed wrench, or careful application of herbicide.

There are many other fine berries for birds, such as Blackberry (*Rubus* spp.), Honeysuckle (*Lonicera* spp.), Wild Grape (*Vitis* spp.), Pacific Wax Myrtle (*Myrica californica*). Any berry species is worth trying!