



for Wildflowers and Native Plants, Inc.

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## BIRDSCAPING

by Sabine Hoppner, Retail Nursery Manager

The exciting diversity of birds species at TPF calls for a few remarks on birdscaping—to me the most rewarding form of landscaping.

Step outside and look at your backyard from a housewren's point of view or a hummingbird's or a phainopepla's. Do you see a diversity of birds at all levels from ground to treetops?

By nature every garden mimics an ecotone: the transition zone between two plant communities. We are talking about that strip in your back yard where the lawn meets flower beds, ornamental shrubs, hedges and trees. In other words: open grassland meets woodland. The edge of a community is always more diverse than its center. Ecologists coined the term "edge-effect" to signify this important phenomenon. Birds are drawn to edges, where a diversity of plants can coexist and offer a diversity of seeds, fruits, flowers and insects.

Besides food, birds need shelter, cover, nesting sites and water. These basic needs can be met by following a few simple concepts:

- Create continuous layers of foliage from ground level to treetops.
- Mix perennials and shrubs in naturalistic groups throughout your garden.
- Pay attention to seasonal changes: mix early-fruiting with late-fruiting plants, evergreen with deciduous plants and early-blooming with late-blooming nectar sources.
- Leave some areas undisturbed for nesting.
- Provide a source of water in a somewhat exposed area, where you can watch the activities but predators like your kitten can't lie in ambush.

Choose plants that would naturally occur in your garden's location. Southern California has a great variety of plant communities, too many to cover here, but let's say you would like to create a dry woodland setting. Here are some ideas for a bird-friendly, attractive garden:

- Use your garden's potentials; add an understory to already existing trees.

- Currants and gooseberries (*Ribes* spp.) and mahonias (*Berberis* spp.) perform excellently in filtered light and under dry conditions. Let honeysuckles (*Lonicera* spp.), wild grapes (*Vitis* spp.), blackberries (*Rubus ursinus*) or *Clematis* spp. cover your fence.
- Set an area aside for undisturbed nesting; allow a small thicket of wild roses to develop to provide both safe shelter and food in the form of rosehips and insects.
- Reduce the size of the lawn in favor of shrubby and perennial plant material. Let the lawn taper off into a shady "forest opening" sporting wild strawberries (*Fragaria* spp.), coral bells (*Heuchera* spp.), hummingbird sage (*Salvia spathacea*) and even an iris patch.

The lawn itself should include sections of ornamental bunchgrasses which produce attractive seedheads and nesting material, especially for finches.

My favorite bird plants are:

- Fuchsia-flowered gooseberries, *Ribes speciosum*, which feature long, tubular red flowers in late winter and abundant berries well into summer, while providing year-round shelter.
- Service-berries, *Amelanchier alnifolia*, which not only flower beautifully but attract cedar waxwings, downy woodpeckers, phoebes, juncos, mourning doves and housefinches, to name a few. Reserve a sunny spot for this shrub or small tree.
- Elderberries, *Sambucus* spp., which provide food for more than 80 species of local and migrating birds; they're a sure way to draw mockingbirds to your garden.

Adding a few bird-friendly native plants to your landscape can fulfill your needs for aesthetics and design as well as attract birds. The indisputable argument for the use of native plants versus exotic plants when creating a bird habitat is that plants and birds of the same region evolved together. What could be aesthetically more satisfying than matching companion plants and animals?