

For the Birds: Designing a Botanical Buffet

AT JENKINS, WE FOLLOW NATURE'S LEAD IN OUR approach to gardening. In 2023, our team designed and planted a garden bed to provide for the unique needs of granivorous (seed-eating) birds, including the American goldfinch, Northern cardinal, and Song sparrow. Granivores' preference for seeds lets many of them stay in Pennsylvania through the winter, happily foraging on seedheads after other food sources have disappeared.

Are you interested in planting a buffet for seed-eaters? Consider how the garden's diversity, structures, and maintenance will meet their needs.

Diversity: When selecting seed-producing plants for a bird garden, diversity is key. Varied plant species let feathered visitors find the right combinations of fats, proteins, and vitamins. Incorporate several species of perennials to offer seeds of different sizes and nutritional qualities.

Plant diversity also supports year-round foraging as different plants set seed at different times. Granivorous birds require seeds as adults in fall and winter, but a few—including the American goldfinch—also feed seeds to their chicks. Mingling plants that set seed in summer (such as red columbine, *Aquilegia canadensis*) with those that set seed in autumn creates a dependable food source.

Structures: Strong stems are an important trait to look for in all of the garden's food plants. If a plant provides seeds, consider whether it can support the weight of feathered foodies. Birds like

to perch while they eat, so each species' stalk should provide a stable, comfortable landing site.

Plants also provide shelter. Research in the 1990s discovered that birds will choose a less nutritious, but safer feeding option over a healthier, risky one.¹ Make the garden both healthy and safe by incorporating a hedge of intermixed shrubs and clumps of low-lying plants.

Maintenance: To feed granivorous birds, seed-bearing plants need proper maintenance (or, rather, un-maintenance). Many native plants set seed at just the right time to provide much-needed sustenance in fall and winter. After their flowers fade, species such as purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) and scarlet beebalm (*Monarda didyma*) develop seeds rich in calories and nutrients. Leave stems and seedheads intact in the garden until all the seed has been picked off—don't compost the birds' dinner as soon as it's ready!

Use these tips to attract granivores and increase the ecological value of your garden. Do it *for the birds!*



LEARN MORE!

Check out page 18 for The Garden Shop opening info and page 19 for our upcoming Bird Walks and Gardening for Birds: Know, Sow, and Grow workshop.

A Menu of Native Perennials for Seed-Eating Birds

PLANT NAME	BENEFITS
ANISE HYSOP <i>Agastache foeniculum</i>	Anise hyssop forms a spire of many small purple flowers over licorice-scented foliage. As the stems brown, each flower individually develops into a thick offering of seeds.
WILD COLUMBINE <i>Aquilegia canadensis</i>	Delicate wild columbine, blooming in early spring, provides nectar for hummingbirds. Later, the lantern-like flowers leave behind upright seedpods for birds foraging in summer.
CONEFLOWER <i>Echinacea</i> spp.	The intriguing shape of coneflower’s seedheads adds aesthetic interest to the garden and offers stable perches to foraging songbirds. Two of our favorites are <i>E. purpurea</i> and <i>E. pallida</i> .
MAXIMILLIAN SUNFLOWER <i>Helianthus maximiliani</i>	The native perennial Maximillian sunflower boasts up to 15 bright yellow blooms per stalk, which each supply a robust seed set.
MEADOW BLAZING STAR <i>Liatris ligulistylis</i>	Meadow blazing star upholds clustered purple flowers that form dense bunches of seeds. It doubles as a great pollinator plant and a monarch magnet.
SCARLET BEEBALM <i>Monarda didyma</i>	Another dual-purpose pollinator plant, scarlet beebalm attracts native insects to its brilliant flowers and songbirds to its seedheads.
BLACK-EYED SUSAN <i>Rudbeckia hirta</i>	A favorite for birds and pollinators alike, cheery black-eyed Susan is an adaptable garden staple. It is drought tolerant and prefers good drainage.
LITTLE BLUESTEM <i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>	Little bluestem grass, named for its lower height and blue-tinted blades, both shelters and feeds ground-nesting granivores like the Dark-eyed junco.
PRAIRIE DROPSEED <i>Sporobolus heterolepis</i>	Prairie dropseed is a low-growing, clumping grass appreciated by ground-feeding birds, such as Mourning doves. Its mounding form offers excellent shelter.
ASTER <i>Symphyotrichum</i> spp.	All asters are prolific seed producers. We love <i>S. novae-angliae</i> ‘Purple Dome’ for its low mounds of purple flowers, which create stunning contrast against goldenrods (<i>Solidago</i> spp.).

1 Houston, Alasdair Ian, et al. "General results concerning the trade-off between gaining energy and avoiding predation." *Biological Sciences*, 29 September 1993.

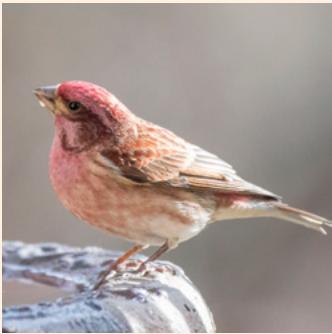


Photo credit: Liz Pettit