

# MESSENGER-INQUIRER

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## **Preparing for Hummingbirds to Visit Your Garden**

They are coming! They arrive as spring flowers, which they use for food, begin to bloom. Dad enjoys watching them in the landscape as they dart from flower to flower feeding on the nectar and insects found there. Yes, the hummingbirds are coming. While planning the garden, consider numerous plants which are available to attract them to your landscape. Even flowers planted in containers attract them. Also, feeders are available to bring them to the garden.

The most common one found in the eastern part of the United States and here is the ruby-throated hummingbird. Usually, it appears in mid-April after migrating from Mexico. The return trip to Mexico runs through September and a few stragglers may remain until early October. The male has a brilliant red metallic-colored throat while the female has a white throat. Both have metallic green feathers on their backs and wings. The bird is small, measuring only 3.5 inches long. An average male would weigh about the same as 2.5 paper clips according to the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension publication “Hummingbirds: An Attractive Asset

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to Your Garden” written by Dr. Thomas Barnes and available at

<http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/for/for97/for97.pdf> or an Extension Office.

The hum comes from the bird beating its wings an average of 53 times per second. It is the only avian species that can fly both backward and upside down. It routinely cruises at about 27 mph.

The needlelike bill enables them to extract flower nectar, which provides the hummingbird with a quick source of energy. A bird needs to eat enough nectar to match 100 percent of its body weight. It also eats small, soft-bodied insects and spiders, especially those found inside the flowers they visit for nectar. One female bird can capture up to 2000 insects a day.

Hummingbirds are attracted to tubular-shaped flowers that are red, pink, or orange. In order to reduce competition among hummingbirds for nectar, design several areas for plants that attract them.

Annual flowering plants bloom throughout the season and serve as a constant source of nectar. Annuals that attract hummingbirds include: petunia (*Petunia x hybrida*), red salvia (*Salvia splendens*), snapdragon (*Antirrhinum majus*), zinnia (*Zinnia*), sweet William (*Dianthus*), spider flower (*Cleome*), nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*), and flowering tobacco (*Nicotiana alata*). I have seen hummingbirds attracted to *Salvia guaranitica* ‘Black and Blue’ even though the flowers are a cobalt blue.

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Perennial plants, which return year after year, appeal to hummingbirds too. These include: canna (*Canna*), beebalm (*Monarda didyma*), cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), coralbells (*Heuchera sanguinea*), hollyhock (*Alcea*), red hot poker (*Kniphofia uvaria*), gladiolus (*Gladiolus*), daylily (*Hemerocallis*), lily (*Lilium*), butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) and beardtongue (*Penstemon* spp.).

Shrubs that attract hummingbirds include: azalea (*Rhododendron*), red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*), flowering quince (*Chaenomeles*), and weigela (*Weigelia florida*).

Native vines for attracting hummingbirds include trumpet creeper (*Campsis radicans*), passionflower (*Passiflora incarnate*), and trumpet honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*).

Feeders provide a way to attract hummingbirds. When purchasing a feeder, select one that is easy to take apart for cleaning and has lots of red color.

You can make your own sugar-water solution for the hummingbird feeder. Commercial mixes may cost more than homemade and many of them contain preservatives that might harm the birds, according to the publication by Dr. Barnes.

The sugar-water solution is made by mixing four parts water to one part sugar. This is the best ratio because it is about the average amount of sucrose produced in typical flowers that attract hummingbirds. A solution any stronger could attract butterflies and bees instead. Most flowers that butterflies and bees pollinate have an average nectar content of 42 percent.

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Boil the water and sugar for two minutes to prevent fermentation; a fermented solution is bad for the birds. Then cool the mixture and refrigerate. Do not microwave the solution.

Microwaving causes a breakdown in the sugar molecule that can change the nutritional value.

If you have a problem with bees at the feeder, reduce the amount of sugar to a five-to-one ratio. The birds still use it, but bees probably will not.

Do not add red dye. Most commercial feeders have sufficient red to attract the birds. Never add honey to the mixture. It will create mold and fungal disease problems.

Active feeders are quickly emptied. If there is no activity at a feeder for several days, take the feeder down, empty the solution, and replace it with fresh sugar water. Every week or so, feeders, even active ones, should be taken down and cleaned with a mild soap detergent, rinsed with a bleach solution as directed on its container, and rinsed thoroughly with water. Then refill with fresh sugar water.

To prevent ants from climbing down the hanger and into the feeder, apply shortening or a commercial “sticky” polybutene repellent to the feeder suspension wire. Then use a portable vacuum cleaner to remove the ants.

Feeders should remain up as long as the hummingbirds are visiting them. Migrating hummingbirds may show up by late July and continue passing through until October. You may help a late straggler make the journey. Leaving feeders out will not keep them from migrating back to Mexico.

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For more information about hummingbirds, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or [annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu](mailto:annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu).

**Annette's tip:**

With the recent rains, crayfish may be active. The only way to manage crayfish is to improve soil drainage. They leave annoying chimneys of soil where it is moist or stays wet. No chemical controls are available.

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