

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



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Attracting Hummingbirds to Your Landscape with Plants
By Annette Meyer Heisdorffer, PhD

They will be back! As the spring flowers begin to bloom and the temperature warms, the hummingbirds migrate back from Mexico and areas further south, usually in mid-April and maybe sooner this year. Such a tiny bird brings hours of enjoyment watching them in the landscape dart from flower to flower feeding on the nectar and insects found there. Numerous plants are available to attract them to the landscape and even to containers. Also, feeders are available to bring them to the garden.

The ruby-throated hummingbird is found in our area. It is the only one that breeds in the eastern part of the United States.

The male ruby-throated hummingbird 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

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“Hummingbirds: An Attractive Asset 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 small bird beats 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. During courtship, their flight can reach 60 mph.

Their needle-like bill helps them to extract flower nectar, especially from tubular-shaped flowers. The nectar 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 the nectar. One female bird can capture up to 2000 insects a day.

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 glauca*). Also, I have seen hummingbirds attracted to the nectar rich *Salvia guaranitica* ‘Black and Blue’ even though the flowers are a cobalt blue.

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*), and beardtongue (*Penstemon* spp.)

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Shrubs that attract hummingbirds include azalea (*Rhododendron*), flowering quince (*Chaenomeles*), weigela (*Weigelia florida*), and the large shrub to small tree of red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*).

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. They should be placed out before the birds arrive. When purchasing a feeder, select one that is easy to take apart for cleaning and has lots of red color on it. Avoid yellow bee guards which actually attract the bees.

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.

Boil the water and sugar for two minutes to prevent fermentation; 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 there is 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.

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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.

To reduce competition among hummingbirds for nectar, design several locations for plants and use more than one feeder to spread them out. They are territorial.

Feeders should remain up as long as the hummingbirds are visiting it. Hummingbirds begin migrating by late July and continue through October. You may help a late straggler make the journey. Leaving feeders out does not keep them from migrating back south.

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

Annette’s tip:

Attract hummingbirds closer to your home with annuals and perennials planted into containers placed on your patio or deck.

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