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Your Indoor Outdoor guide to gardening **DECEMBER**

Feeding Birds Naturally – with Berried Shrubs and Trees

The melodies of birds singing are exhilarating – they seem to make worries melt away! We know the majority of Americans feel this way, since “birding” has become the second most popular outdoor activity in the USA, first, of course is gardening.

You can entice the winged maestros into your yard by providing irresistible opportunities for food and shelter. Shrubs and trees will naturally attract birds since they are bearers of nectar, fruits, berries, seeds, nuts and cone; within the branches, birds find a welcoming retreat to rest; hide from predators, or nest.

While some shrubs or trees provide food exclusively and others, only shelter, the following 15 provide both: ash, cedar, Cotoneaster, crab apple, dogwood, elderberry, hackberry, hawthorn, holly, juniper, mulberry, oak, pine, sumac and wax myrtle.

As you decide which to add to your property, consider the following: by planning natives, you will find less watering is needed (after the first year) and less insect and disease damage will occur; by planting in clusters, you create the dense and safe haven birds search for; area location should be close enough that you are able to observe the birds, but not so close that your constant activity may disturb them; finally, by maintaining an even balance of plant repetition and variety, you will attract the broadest diversity of bird types.

Once you're designated a specific area, you may decide to incorporate supplemental features such as birdbath and feeders. If desired, by selecting specific feeder foods, you can really work to attract a particular bird species you may be interested in observing up close.

As the shrubs and trees become established in their new home, invest the first 12-18 months nurturing them, so in years to come, they can reward you with their grace and beauty; likewise, the birds will provide you with countless hours of fascinating observation and as an added bonus, they will keep the insect population under control in your yard.

By Leeza Fox, Penn State Master Gardener

WHAT'S BEAUTIFUL NOW?

Look for berried plants; colorful and textured bark; the texture of ornamental grasses; rich variations of blue, green and even gold in evergreen colors; and, beautiful branching patterns of plants outlined by snow.

SEASONAL

- ❖ Poinsettias are in full flower in December.
- ❖ Garden gift suggestions: home weather station, quality hand tools, garden gloves, bird feeders, bulbs for indoor forcing, gardening books or subscriptions, gift certificates from garden centers, nurseries or mail order companies.
- ❖ Gift plants can be transported with some caution. Wrap plants in 8-10 layers of newspaper covering the foliage. Warm up the car prior to loading plants for delivery.
- ❖ Punch holes in the bottom of decorative foil around holiday plants and place them on plates to catch excess water.

- ❖ Christmas trees that are cut and brought inside can use from 2 pints to a gallon of water each day. Keep your tree well watered.
- ❖ For live B&B Christmas trees, do not overwater and plant outside after one week.
- ❖ When using de-icers on walks bordering lawn and flowerbeds, apply cautiously, they contain salts which can damage plants and walks. Sand is often a better choice for icy walks and steps.
- ❖ To remove snow more efficiently, coat your snow shovel with a "non-stick" cooking spray, the snow will slide off. Recoat as needed.

PLANNING FOR NEXT YEAR'S GARDEN

- ❖ Order seed and plant catalogs.
- ❖ Look over gardening books and magazines for ideas for your garden.

HOUSEPLANTS

- ❖ Holiday plants include Amaryllis, poinsettias, Christmas cacti, Jerusalem cherry, weeping fig, Norfolk Island pine, paperwhite narcissus.
- ❖ Keep poisonous plants out of reach of pets and children. These include holly, mistletoe and Jerusalem cherry. Poinsettias are not poisonous.
- ❖ Take cuttings of African violets and begonias.
- ❖ An orange or grapefruit seed taken fresh from the fruit without drying it out can be planted in moist soilless mix to produce a citrus plant.
- ❖ Leaves of tropical foliage plants, Philodendrons, Dracenas palms, rubber plants, all benefit from having their leaves washed. They can be washed easily with a sponge dipped in soapy water that is squeezed out.
- ❖ Annuals suitable for use as houseplants include asters, Celosia, calendulas, marigolds. It is best to select dwarf types (12" or less tall).
- ❖ Provide a monthly soaking to all your houseplants to remove salt buildup. Place the plants in a sink or tub and use lukewarm water until water comes out bottom.
- ❖ Check bougainvillea and Ficus for scale insects. A Q-tip dipped in alcohol can be used to wipe the insects from stems and leaves.

BULBS

- ❖ Pre-cooled hyacinths, narcissus, and tulips can be used to force flowers. Place the pots in complete darkness for a week to produce longer stems. Place tulips and narcissus in light when stems are 3 inches tall. Hyacinths do better when moved to light when stems are 5 inches tall.
- ❖ Check ornamental bulbs and produce in storage for shriveling. Shriveled or decayed materials should be removed. Increase the relative humidity if bulbs are starting to shrivel.

COMPOST

- ❖ Keep compost pile moist to aid decay prior to dormancy for the coldest part of the winter.
- ❖ If you want to keep bins working faster over winter, pile bales of hay to windward side. The pile will need to be kept turned and moisture added to avoid anaerobic conditions (pile will smell bad and need 'correcting' if this happens).

VEGETABLE GARDENS

- ❖ Store excess seeds or harvested seeds in a cool dry place (a sealed jar in the refrigerator works well).
- ❖ Check all vegetables in storage for decay and discard as necessary.

SMALL FRUITS

- ❖ Mulch strawberry plants with 4-5 inches of loose mulch to prevent heaving of plants.

HERBS

- ❖ Prepare gifts of herb vinegars with fresh herbs or garlic and add about 4 oz. to one quart of wine vinegar. After two weeks, strain out the herbs and bottle.
- ❖ Some herbs that are suitable for a sunny window include: tarragon, chives, oregano, marjoram, rosemary.

LAWNS

- ❖ Keep tree leaved off lawn to avoid lawn problems.
- ❖ Fill depression and grade around the yard with loose soil. The soil will settle over winter and make a firm, even surface for next year.
- ❖ If the grass is frozen, stay off lawn areas. Grass cannot recover readily from foot-traffic while dormant.

PERENNIALS, BIENNIALS & ANNUALS

- ❖ Label perennials with names on stones near the plants.
- ❖ Deciduous ferns (those turning brown in winter) can be cut back to the ground.
- ❖ In very cold weather, cover cold frames overnight with old carpet hay, burlap bags stuffed with leaves or there insulating cover.

TREES & SHRUBS

- ❖ Young plants can be injured by sunscald over winter. Brush or screens on the south or west sides of the plants help prevent sunscald.
- ❖ Select an arborist and set up an appointment for the spring pruning of your trees (mid-February to mid-April). Avoid those who recommend topping trees or who do not understand proper pruning techniques. If you plan on doing your own pruning, learn the proper time and techniques for pruning each plant ahead of time.
- ❖ Cut branches or many evergreens can be used for holiday arrangements. Do not place fresh needle-leaved evergreens directly on finished wood, use felt or cloth underneath. Sap from the branches can harm wooden surfaces.
- ❖ Make hardwood cuttings of: Forsythia, flowering quince, Weigela and Hydrangea; place them in cold frame outside.
- ❖ Evergreen shrubs should be protected from heavy snow loads by tying their stems together with twine. Excess snow loads should be removed with upward sweeping motions of a broom to reduce limb breakage.
- ❖ Lichens may be more apparent on trees after the leaves have fallen. They are a harmless combination of a fungus and an alga. Typically, they grow on trees with a high open canopy in areas with good air quality.

ROSES

- ❖ Mulch 6-8 inches deep to protect the canes and graft union after the ground freezes to 3-4 inches.

WATER GARDENS

- ❖ Keep ponds and small water gardens free of debris from winter storms.
- ❖ If not previously drained and prepared for winter, do so before freezing damage occurs.

WOOD ASH

- ❖ Wood ash is high in potassium and if your soil is deficient, it can be used as fertilizer in small amounts. Avoid using wood ash around acid-loving plants, as it will raise the pH.

WINTER WILD BIRD CARE

- ❖ Once you set up a feeding station, be careful to keep it filled throughout the winter. Also, provide fresh water in wood or cement bowls.