Gardening for the Birds

By Dale Odorizzi, Lanark County Master Gardeners

A garden without birds is like a half-finished picture. Some people are gardeners who like to watch birds and others are Bird Watchers who garden to attract them--the end result is a garden with birds.

Like all of us, birds require:

- **Food** – Food for a diversity of wildlife can be provided through combinations of seed, nut or fruit producing trees, berry-producing shrubs, grasses and/or flowers. Consider food needs throughout the seasons.
- **Water** – If space limitations prohibit a pond, consider a bird bath or water bowl.
- **Shelter** – Providing evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs, snags (dead trees), brush piles, logs and rock piles gives wildlife protection from inclement weather and predators.
- **Space** – Birds view your property in three-dimensional terms. Including diverse layers of vegetation – tall and short trees, shrubs, wildflowers and ground cover – increases the "space" of your habitat.



Planting native plants attracts native insects which in turn attracts birds. We often think of birds as eating seeds, which they do or nectar which hummingbirds do BUT over 80% of a bird's diet is protein which comes from insects. Just like us, birds need protein for healthy bodies. When mother birds are pregnant and when the babies are growing, they need an incredible amount of protein which comes from insects. Aphids for example are a popular treat for nestlings. So, please stop spraying every insect you see. Insecticides are bad for birds.

Native trees and shrubs provide places for shelter and food. Conifers hold onto their cones to provide seeds year-round for our overwintering birds. They also attract insects that attract birds. Deciduous trees make excellent nesting spots, and many provide seeds and attract insects and caterpillars. Maple, Oaks Cherry and Serviceberries are excellent choices.



There are many types of Viburnums but two of my favourites are the Arrowwood with its beautiful white flowers and small dark blue berries and the Nannyberry. Many, many varieties of birds flock to them.

Dogwoods are another wonderful shrub to attract birds. The Red Twigged Dogwood produces berries early in the season. The pagoda Dogwood has and interesting branching structure and berries that attract. However, the Grey Dogwood grows densely and produces and incredible amounts of berries. Grey Dogwood produce their berries later in the season so they provide a dietary boost for migrating birds. We had families of Catbirds nesting in our Grey Dogwood (or as I like to call them, my Birdie Bed and Breakfast.



As well as planting trees and shrubs, there are many perennials that birds enjoy. Some just like the insects they find in your dense perennial gardens. Some love the seeds, especially seeds on perennials left on the plant over winter. Echinacea, Rudbeckia, Heliopsis, Coreopsis and Mulleins are just a few of the native perennials much loved by birds.

If you want to attract birds, earth friendly gardening is mandatory. This is really Bird friendly gardening. So, avoid herbicides, avoid pesticides and plant native plants.