

Hummingbird Attraction

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Folks frequently wonder how they can invite hummingbirds onto their properties after discovering that artificial feeders attract more wasps than birds! The best method is to create a hummingbird habitat! Shade trees conceal the tiny birds' walnut-sized nests, made of lichen and spider webs. Low tree limbs and tall bushes provide perches where the birds may scout the area before descending to feed. Native plants bearing red blossoms effectively catch hummingbirds' eyes, as they love nectar from red cardinal flowers (*Lobelia cardinalis*), scarlet beebalm (*Monarda didyma*), and coral or trumpet honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*). Trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*) also works, but grows so aggressively that it is an unsuitable choice for most residential grounds. Hummingbirds also visit other colors of trumpet-shaped flowers, such as Culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*), heart-leaved skullcap (*Scutellaria ovata*), and blue cardinal flower (*Lobelia siphilitica*). Jewelweed (*Impatiens capensis*), a prolific, late-blooming annual inhabiting wetlands, has one of the last flowers from which the hummingbirds sip before migrating south. Requiring more than nectar to survive, hummingbirds devour spiders and insects, especially small flies (e.g., gnats and mosquitoes), which constitutes a significant portion of their diet. These arthropods are packed with protein, lipids, essential elements, and vitamins. Sometimes hummingbirds congregate, but normally they remain solitary and territorial, often engaging in aerial combat amongst themselves or even chasing off larger birds. They accept people nearby provided folks move slowly.



Figure 1. A ruby-throated hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*), Northern Virginia's only species, prepares to sip nectar from a cardinal flower. Hummingbirds became a daily summer feature since establishing this Fairfax native plant garden several years ago.

Hummingbird feeders are the obvious omission here. Nutritionally, they are akin to candy; ecologically, they reduce the bird's "pollinator" role. Feeders should never be sweetened with honey, which harms hummingbirds. Artificial food coloring and fungus contamination are detrimental, too. If you must hang a feeder, use table sugar and boiling water (1:4 ratio, cooled to room temperature before filling) or a commercially available preparation, clean it at least every three days, and take it down for the year after Labor Day, thereby encouraging a normal autumn migration to tropical latitudes where these birds overwinter.

Though fall is upon us, it is a perfect season to start planning next year's hummingbird landscape. Add new

plants in October, when they have the best survival chances. When properly designed, the multipurpose hummingbird habitat also suits many more bird and pollinating insect species!

A thorough website on ruby-throated hummingbirds is http://plants.usda.gov/pollinators/Ruby-throated_hummingbird.pdf*. Two exceptions to the advice it offers: please **do not landscape with either butterfly bush (*Buddleja davidii*) or rose-of-Sharon (*Hibiscus syriacus*)** as these non-native invasive shrubs cause more environmental damage than good. Correctly attracting these fascinating and lithe birds via native plants is fun, easy, and rewarding!

*2024 USDA website update: https://www.fs.usda.gov/wildflowers/pollinators/pollinator-of-the-month/ruby-throated_hummingbird.shtml

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