

Creating Native Plant Hummingbird Habitat in Georgia

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Hummingbirds are important pollinators for a number of plants. Only one species, the ruby-throated hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*), breeds in the eastern half of North America. The featured plant is cardinalflower (*Lobelia cardinalis*).

The ruby-throated hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*) is the only hummingbird that breeds in the eastern half of North America. It can be found in the spring, summer, and fall throughout Georgia, where it nests in the Coastal Plain, Piedmont, and Mountain Provinces. A wonderful way to enjoy the company of these hummingbirds is to create hummingbird-friendly habitat. Nectar-producing plants, insects and water are three key ingredients to creating an environment your tiny visitors will appreciate!

Nectar-Producing Plants

To be successful in keeping hummingbirds around your landscape, you must garden for them. Natural nectar from native plants provides hummingbirds with a steady supply of fast energy and a balanced source of micro-nutrients to meet the demands of their high metabolic rate. It is estimated that hummingbirds need to consume the nectar from

between 1000 to 2000 flowers each day, which takes up approximately 1.5 times their body mass in water each day as they feed. Unfortunately, development and sprawl have caused hummingbird-friendly natural habitat to disappear all across the country and across the birds' migration routes. You can help ease the pressure by creating your own hummingbird-friendly habitat by implementing the following:

- Plants should be chosen for their ability to produce nectar, to grow well in your particular region, and to be in bloom when the hummingbirds need them. These provide the fundamental basis for creating hummingbird-friendly habitat. Choose native plants that provide significantly more nectar than cultivated hybrids and non-native ornamental plants. Since native plants evolved with our local climate, they also generally require less care than exotics and cultivars.



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EcoScapes website:

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- Nesting hummingbirds will need nectar from roughly March to October. Therefore, your garden should have numerous native nectar plants available throughout this time. It is best to plant a variety of species and to arrange these flowers in several groupings. Nesting hummingbirds are very aggressive and territorial around their food source. Having more than one flower garden will allow several hummers to feed at the same time without conflict.
- Choose plants that hummingbirds prefer. These are generally odorless with tubular flowers. Tubular flowers that are both large and solitary or in loose drooping clusters appear best. Generally, tubular flowers hold large amounts of nectar at their base. Red blossoms are especially attractive to them, followed by oranges and pinks, purples, blues and yellows.
- Fill your landscape with a diversity of flowering plants, vines, shrubs and trees. Don't forget to provide native shade trees to provide nesting, roosting, and sheltering sites for hummingbirds. Consider including window boxes or hanging baskets as well.
- Beware of exotics, such as bougainvillea, which only trick hummingbirds into wasting precious energy trying to drink from empty blossoms.
- Encourage your community to make their landscapes hummingbird friendly as well. An entire corridor of habitat is much more valuable than scattered patches.

Insects

Although nectar and sap help meet some of the hummingbird's nutritional requirements, their diet also requires protein from both insects and pollen for growth (both chicks and feathers), development, and maintenance. Like swifts,

hummingbirds have specialized neck muscles that help them take insects from the air. The birds also glean insects from leaves or bark of trees and from spider webs. To maintain a healthy ecosystem that will sustain wildlife and insects in your landscape, you can implement the following:

- Eliminate pesticide use in your landscape. Pesticide use can deplete the insect supply for hummingbirds and other birds and can lead to direct poisoning of birds. Spiders and insects, such as mosquitoes, aphids, and gnats, are an important part of an adult hummingbird's diet, and young hummingbirds that are still in the nest are fed them almost exclusively.
- Make your landscape contain some insect-pollinated flowers as well as plants that hummingbirds pollinate.



Hummingbirds depend on insects and flower nectar. Flowers, such as trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*), that attract insects and hummingbirds ensure there's plenty of food for hummingbirds.

- Provide birds with extra protein by hanging a basket with overripe fruit or banana peels nearby to attract fruit flies that they can consume.
- Hummingbird nests are woven together with spider webs. Thus, it is important to protect spiders from pesticides. Hummingbird nests are usually built 15 to 20 feet up in trees, near the ends of hanging branches sheltered from above by leaves.

Water

Providing appropriate fresh water resources for bathing is an important element in attracting hummingbirds. Hummingbirds are known to bathe in pools of droplets that collect on leaves. They also prefer to bathe in water that is shallow and moving. Make sure that your bird baths, feeders, and/or misters are at least four feet above a cleared area in order to prevent cat predation.

Other Hummingbird Gardening Considerations

Artificial Feeders. Flowers are the natural way to attract hummingbirds to your landscape. However, man-made feeders filled with the correct ratio and fresh mixture of water and sugar provide a supplement to flowers that increases the likelihood of attracting hummingbirds. Because feeders can be placed almost anywhere, they increase your opportunities to view hummers from inside your home. However, feeders should not be the sole source of food provided. The sugar may appeal to the hummingbirds' sweet tooth, but it provides less nourishment than the mineral and protein-rich natural nectar. Provide and maintain a hummingbird feeder filled with fresh non-distilled water and uncolored white granulated cane table

sugar (sucrose) (one part sugar to four parts water). NEVER use honey or artificial sweeteners, which could be fatal to hummingbirds if ingested. Boil the sugar solution to help dissolve the sugar. Then allow it to cool before filling a feeder. Georgia's hot weather can cause rapid bacterial growth in these feeders and birds that drink contaminated water can die. To avoid this, change the solution every 2 to 4 days (depending on the season). Thoroughly clean the feeders with hot water and white vinegar. Do not use soap or chlorine bleach. If you are using more than one feeder, arrange them at least 10 feet apart so that all hummers can feed peacefully at once.

Cats are Predators. These tiny birds are susceptible to predation by house cats. Please keep cats indoors to protect them from the elements and to protect hummingbirds and other native birds from their hunting activities.

For more information regarding Georgia's native plants, to utilize the EcoScapes native plant search engine website, or learn more about how to promote and protect pollinators, go to the EcoScapes website:

www.gacoast.uga.edu/outreach/programs/ecoscapes/.



Source: Derek Stoner, Delaware Nature Society



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