

# Plants That Attract Birds

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Plants play important roles in providing a home, shelter and food for birds. Two groups of plants are important sources of shelter for birds: (1) large, old trees with cavities that can be used to build nests and (2) densely branched plants, especially those that are thorny or spiny. The role plants have in providing food can be direct, as when birds eat the leaves, fruits, and seeds of a plant, or indirect, as when birds eat animals that have eaten plants. Occasionally, plants may also serve as a source of water.

Among bird-attracting plants, perhaps none are more valuable than oak trees. The limbs of oak trees are often festooned with Spanish-moss, which many birds use as nesting material, and stout oak branches can support large epiphytic bromeliads whose tank-like rosettes act as reservoirs of water. In the autumn, oaks provide a bounty of food in the form of acorns, and they do so just when birds are in need of plentiful food to fatten up for the winter or for their fall migration. Finally, oaks, more so than any other type of tree, serve as food for a myriad of insects, including the caterpillars of several hundred different species of moths and butterflies.

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Why is the production of insects by oaks important? Because even fruit- and seed-eating birds become insect hunters when there are babies in the nest, since insects provide the protein that fast-growing nestlings require. For dry sites where a large tree is needed, live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) is ideal. If a smaller tree is required, then sand live oak (*Quercus geminata*) is eminently suitable. For either a moist or dry site, gardeners can plant laurel oaks (*Quercus laurifolia*), which occur in both wet forests and dry hammocks. Also suitable for a moist spot, and nearly as valuable as oaks in providing shelter and food for birds, is swamp maple (*Acer rubra*).

Plants that provide berries and other fruit are attractive to many birds, but to attract the greatest diversity of birds, the fruits should be small. Fortunately, South Florida is very rich in plants that produce small fruits. A variety of native plants



Female dahoon hollies (*Ilex cassine*), such as this one at Mounts, bear ornamental red berries in the autumn and winter.

provide fruits that have a high fat content and these are especially sought out by birds migrating in the autumn when they need lots of calories to fly to their winter homes. Among such plants with high-fat fruits are cabbage palms (*Sabal palmetto*), gumbo limbo (*Bursera simaruba*), Jamaican caper (*Capparis jamaicensis*), lancewood (*Ocotea coriacea*), lignum-vitae (*Guajacum sanctum*), red-bay (*Persea borbonia*), swamp-bay (*Persea palustris*), and wax-myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*). Other berry-producing plants attractive to birds include dahoon holly (*Ilex cassine*), marlberry (*Ardisia escallonioides*), pigeon-plum (*Coccoloba diversifolia*), stoppers (*Eugenia* species), Walter's viburnum (*Viburnum obovatum*), West Indian laurel cherry (*Prunus myrtifolia*), and wild-coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*). Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*), with its purple-amethyst fruits, and snowberry (*Chiococca alba*), with pristine white fruits, are useful for extending the color palette of a collection of fruiting, bird-attracting plants.



Wild-coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*) is a wildlife powerhouse whose flowers attract butterflies and whose red fruits attract birds.

## BIRDS IN THE GARDEN



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A variety of wildflowers and grasses, such as this coneflower (*Rudbeckia mollis*) will provide ample seeds for grain- and seed-eating birds.

To maximize the diversity of bird visitors, it is also important to provide plants for seed- and grain-feeding birds. The best plants in this regard are wildflowers and grasses and good choices include blazing star (*Liatris* spp.), goldenrods (*Solidago* spp.), pepper-grass (*Lepidium virginianum*), sunflowers (*Helianthus* spp.), and tropical sage (*Salvia coccinea*). Although wickedly spiny and seldom cultivated, the native thistles (*Cirsium horridulum* and *C. nuttallii*) are also extremely attractive to many birds, that use the fluff from the seed heads as nesting material and relish the oily seeds.

Visit Rufino's blog at [rufino-osorio.blogspot.com](http://rufino-osorio.blogspot.com).



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Snowberry (*Chiococca alba*), seen at the Clayton Hutcheson Building at Mounts, has highly ornamental white fruits.



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A female red maple (*Acer rubrum*), growing in Mounts' rain garden, bears brilliant red seeds in the spring.

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