



Those Beautiful Hummingbirds

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Here they are - those beautiful hummingbirds! Have you ever seen them in a neighbor's yard, and wondered how to attract them to your own backyard? The best way to attract these beautiful birds is to create a habitat with flowers, shrubs, trees and vines that hummingbirds will enjoy. A small habitat isn't difficult, and more items can be added over time. Primary considerations to draw hummingbirds are brightly-colored, tubular flowers that produce nectar, and water – ideally, a mist-type water feature.

Nectar is critical to hummingbirds. It is a sugar-rich liquid produced within the flower, and acts like perfumed sweet water attracting the bird to the plant. Nectar is an important food and life source for hummingbirds, giving them strength and energy. Most hummers must feed continuously throughout the day to keep their wings going at incredibly high rates of speed for flight and hovering.

Hummingbirds favor tubular-shaped blooms because these birds have elongated bills and long forked tongues, enabling them to sip nectar easily from this shape of flower. Hummers even have their own favorite colors: bright orange and red flowers are preferred, though they will visit other colored flowers as well. There are many flowers that grow well in our county that attract hummingbirds: Salvia or Sage (*Lamiaceae*), Monarda or Bee Balm (*Lamiaceae*), Agastache (*Lamiaceae*), Phlox (*Polemoniaceae*), Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), Lantana (*Verbenaceae*), Lonicera or Honeysuckle (*Caprifoliaceae*) (but-avoid Japanese Honeysuckle (*L.japonica*), as it can be very invasive), Pasiflora or Passion Vine (*Passifloraceae*), Columbine or Aquilegia (*Ranunculaceae*), Butterfly Bush or Buddleja (*Scrophulariaceae*) and Fuchsias (*Onagraceae*).

Hummingbirds like to perch on hidden branches for cover, especially evergreens. A good habitat provides a place for these tiny birds to feed, hide from predators, nest, and raise their young. Plants that attract hummingbirds typically do best in sunny areas. It's also good to consider flowers that bloom at different times during the year so resident and migrating hummingbirds can find nectar whenever they visit your yard.

Hummingbirds need water in their habitat; very shallow birdbaths with misters are best. They often bathe on the fly, and can be seen darting in and out of oscillating sprinklers.

Hummingbird feeders with homemade nectar can be used to supplement flower nectar. Homemade nectar uses a ratio of four parts of water to one part of sugar; for example, one cup of water to one-fourth cup of sugar. (Red food coloring is not necessary.) Boil the sugar water mixture, and let it cool before adding it to clean feeders. The sugar water mixture can be kept in the refrigerator for several days.

It's important to be diligent in cleaning and rinsing out the feeders because the solution is highly susceptible to mold, harmful bacteria, and fermentation. Feeders are best located where they are protected from wind and have some shade to prevent the sugar solution from spoiling too quickly. Try to empty and refill the feeders with fresh solution every few days; if you leave the feeders empty for too long, the hummingbirds may move elsewhere.

Be sure to hang the feeders in an area where you can observe the hummingbirds – they are so much fun to watch! These tiny birds, some only 3 1/2 inches long and weighing 1/8 of an ounce, can give hours of pleasure. With the right plants and good feeders, the hummers will surely come to your backyard habitat, and you'll be the envy of the neighborhood.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.