

Right Flowers, Feeders Attracts Hummingbirds

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — By putting up feeders and planting tempting flowers, you can draw hummingbirds to your garden year after year, says a wildlife biologist in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"If you have the right flowers and feeder, you even can draw hummingbirds into a suburban environment," says Margaret Brittingham, associate professor of wildlife resources.

"People love hummingbirds because they're so extreme in their looks, size and beauty," she says. "They're the smallest bird in Pennsylvania, and they have very iridescent feathers. They're also very tame around people. You can attract them right to your kitchen window."

Hummingbirds are fun to watch for their unusual flight. "They move their wings in a figure-eight pattern," Brittingham says. "They can fly both forwards and backwards and hover in mid-air. You'll often know a hum-

mingbird is near by the humming sound made by their wings." This hovering flight allows hummingbirds to maneuver around flowers like bees.

"You'll also see them do an aerial 'pendulum display,'" Brittingham says. "The male flies up and down like a pendulum to attract a female, or to defend a feeding site. Hummingbirds also will chase each other — they're fairly aggressive for such tiny birds."

Although 16 hummingbird species are native to the United States, only the ruby-throated hummingbird is found east of the Mississippi River.

Each September, the birds migrate to Mexico and Central America, flying nonstop 600 miles across the Gulf of Mexico. In the spring, the birds return, following the blooming of early-season flowers, such as azaleas, rhododendrons and columbine. They arrive in Pennsylvania from mid-April to early May.

To attract hummingbirds to your yard, Brittingham suggests planting masses of flowers. "Hummingbirds like tubular flowers that are orange, red and pink," she says. "You should have a variety of flowers blooming from mid- to late-April through the summer season."

"Early in the season, azaleas and rhododendrons are good choices. For early summer, plant bleeding hearts and columbines. During late summer, hummingbirds come to bergamot and the late summer wildflowers. You also may want to purchase hanging plants, such as fuschia."

Other early summer flowers that attract hummingbirds include fly-honeysuckle, fire pink, tulip poplar, weigala and trumpet honeysuckle.

Mid- to late-summer flowers that attract hummingbirds also include spotted touch-me-knot, trumpet vine, cardinal-flower, garden phlox, coralberry, hollyhock, Turk's cap lily, rose of Sha-

ron, butterfly milkweed, butterfly bush, bee-balm and impatiens.

Hummingbirds play a major role in pollination. Tubular flowers with long stamens are specially adapted to be pollinated by hummingbirds.

Using long beaks and long tongues, the birds feed on the flowers' nectar. As they brush against the flowers, pollen sticks to their bodies, then transfers to the next flower they visit.

Homeowners also can hang a feeder to draw hummingbirds to a specific location, like a kitchen window. Hummingbird feeders can be purchased at garden supply centers. "Hummingbirds will return to the same feeder each year," Brittingham says. "Many times they'll hover at the window before you even put the feeder up."

Brittingham suggests filling feeders with a nectar of one part sugar to four parts water. "A stronger solution can be harmful to their kidneys, while a weaker one may not attract them. You don't need to purchase commercial nectar — it's no better than what you can make at home."

"You should avoid honey and water mixtures," she

says. "Some people think honey and water is healthier. But it ferments and grows a mold that can be very harmful to hummingbirds."

Although some people have recommended adding red food coloring to the nectar, Brittingham says it adds no benefit. "The birds will be attracted to the red plastic on the feeder," she says.

You also can entice hummingbirds by purchasing a misting attachment for a birdbath, available at some garden supply stores. "Hummingbirds like to fly through the mist to bathe," Brittingham says.

Finally, make sure the feeder and birdbath are out of reach of cats. "Cats are extremely proficient hunters — and they hunt whether they're hungry or not," Brittingham says. "You also should minimize your use of pesticides. Pesticides may harm the flowers hummingbirds feed on, as well as the hummingbirds themselves."

For more information about hummingbirds, see the Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences publication, "Pennsylvania Wildlife No. 6: Attracting Hummingbirds." Single copies are available free of charge from your county Penn State Cooperative Extension office, or from the College of Agricultural Sciences Publications Distribution Center (call 814-865-6713).

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