

Native Gardening for Hummingbirds

by Cindy Gilberg



When do the hummingbirds return to St. Louis? Their arrival in mid-late April is almost perfectly timed to the blooming of wild columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*) in our woodlands. The promise of nectar is welcome after an exhausting spring migration north from Mexico and Central America. Known only in the western hemisphere, there are over 300 species of hummingbirds but only one that commonly frequents our gardens – the ruby throated hummingbird. These tiny gems have iridescent plumage and are, as John J. Audubon once remarked, “glittering

fragments of a rainbow”. Fondly referred to as ‘hummers’ by many, their preferred native habitat is woodland edges. A good mix (about 50/50) of open area to tree and shrub plantings is an easily attained landscape in residential properties. This will provide everything they need from shelter and nesting areas to open arenas for their aerial displays during mating season.

Because of hummingbirds’ high metabolism and need for copious amounts of energy-rich nectar, they can’t afford to waste time foraging – flowers help them out by advertising both color and shape. Red, yellow and orange flowers as well as tubular flowers are ‘flags’ that draw the attention of hummers. These flowers co-evolved with long-tongued creatures (hummingbirds and butterflies), offering a tasty meal in exchange for pollination. A lesser known fact is that these miniature birds compliment their sweet tooth by hunting for small insects that add much-needed protein to their diet.

The key to creating a garden attractive to hummingbirds as well as many other insects and birds is to plant a diverse backbone of the native plants they depend on for

survival. Be attentive to the bloom-times, adding in flowers for each season so that nectar is always available. The color red will attract them initially yet they also forage on plants such as blue salvia (*Salvia azurea*), smooth beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*) and wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*). The plant list should also include flowers that attract small pollinating insects, for example coneflowers and other composite flowers as well as plants such as mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum spp.*) and buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*). Design plantings that include masses of each species to create big splashes of color – hummers prefer to frequent easy buffets. The final touch is to incorporate various trees and shrubs for shelter and nesting sites. Don't be tempted to spray pesticides - using natives eliminates the need for pesticides, ensuring that these tiny winged jewels won't die from exposure to harmful chemicals.

Springtime offers quite a few choices for nectar besides columbine. Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*), wild sweet William (*Phlox divaricata*), wild geranium (*Geranium maculatum*) and rose verbena (*Verbena canadensis*) are just a few that can be included. The siren-red flowers of fire pink (*Silene virginica*) are another guaranteed magnet as are the red, tubular flowers of red buckeye tree (*Aesculus pavia*). I was surprised to observe

hummingbirds frequenting a clump of copper iris (*Iris fulva*) but later read that irises are among those plants desirable to hummers.

Summer marks the beginning of mating season and these bold little birds waste no time



to attract a female, stopping only to replenish their supply of food. Watch for the courtship dance of the red-throated males – a spectacular swooping U-shape flight. Nesting soon follows as females collect spider web strands for gluing their minute cup-shaped nests to twigs along with bits of lichen and assorted fluff. The result is about as

big as a walnut and holds two eggs. An abundance of summer flowers satisfy their voracious appetites. Bright orange flowers of butterfly milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), trumpet creeper (*Campsis radicans*) and our well-behaved native honeysuckle (*Lonicera flava*) serve up delectable meals. Add some pink *Monarda* (*M. fistulosa*), garden phlox (*Phlox paniculata*), red royal catchfly (*Silene regia*) and Eastern blazing star (*Liatris scariosa*) for further variety. An unusual plant for dry sites is American aloe (*Manfreda virginica*). Though hummers aren't attracted by fragrance aloe emits a delicate fragrance in the evening from its long, tubular flowers, an indication that it counts on more than one group of pollinators. Top off the summer list with yellow (*Echinacea paradoxa*) and purple coneflowers (*Echinacea purpurea*), Western sunflower (*Helianthus occidentalis*) and other flowers that attract protein-rich insects.

By late summer both adults and young enter into a contest, vying for their spot at flowers and feeders. They become quite territorial and aggressive in an attempt to stock up on food as the moment approaches for them to once again fly south for the winter. Among the autumn flowers red cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) reigns supreme, loving the moist, part-shade haunts that hummingbirds frequent. Another real magnet in fall is bright orange annual jewel weed (*Impatiens capensis*) that grows in similar sites as cardinal flower. Some more late-blooming perennials to try are turtlehead (*Chelone*) and obedient plant (*Physostegia*), both with pink to white tubular flowers that are quite evident and appealing. An additional surprise for me was the frequent visits hummers made to hardy *Hibiscus* – not only white but not tubular at all, yet a valuable addition to the plant list.

These amazing minute gems are creatures of habit. The same birds return to those sites that are especially attractive in providing not only great nectar sources but also water, shelter and nesting sites. The measure of your success will be evident with their arrival the following spring.

Pick up many of these plants and more at the Shaw Nature Reserve Spring Wildflower Sale! A wonderful collection of growers and plants will be on hand to help you complete your native landscape