



Beyond Seed and Suet

by Sean James

I didn't want to be a birder. Birders are weird. I used to think that at least – the old English lady in tweed and all that. I just sort of evolved into a birder. Thing is, birds are pretty cool. They bring sound and motion to the garden, which are probably the two most neglected things in landscape design. They bring life. They bring the joy of having a nest of cardinals grow up by your front door.

Beyond aesthetics, birds clean up pests incredibly effectively. I always chuckle when I listen to garden radio shows and people complaining about slug problems in their garden. I don't have slug problems. I don't have Japanese beetles. I don't have any pests that get out of control. It's not that I don't have pests. It's just that they don't become issues.

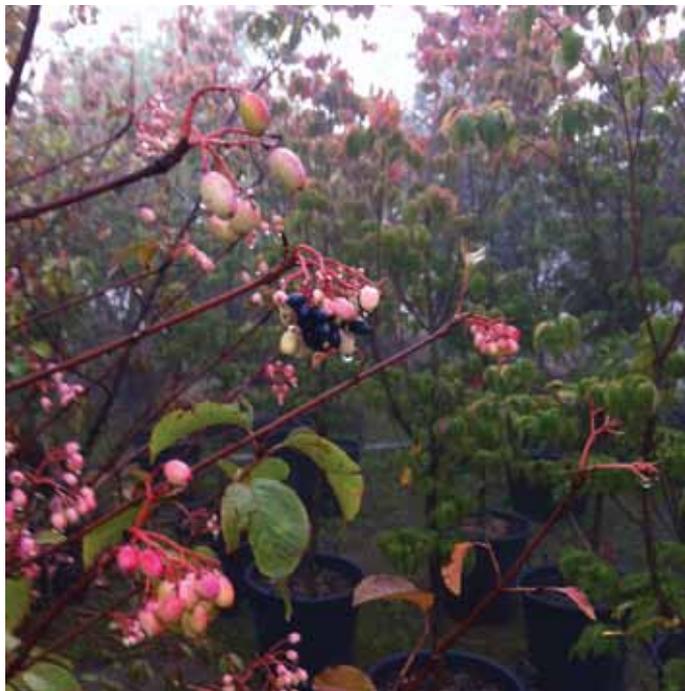
So the big question is, how do we encourage birds to visit the garden? There are a few simple steps to be taken to make birds feel safe and welcome on your property.

There are many things in nature that find birds tasty. If you ever see a puff, (I often semi-jokingly refer to it as a blast-scar), of feathers on your lawn, that indicates a "hawk strike" where some bird, often a mourning dove, has gone on to the Great Nest in the sky. I remember my stepmother being quite distressed that a hawk got a bird near her feeder. She stopped feeding the birds. I laughed it off and thought, "Well, it's a birdfeeder. We have a big one." She didn't see it as lightly as I did. The fact is the birds need 30 per cent cover in your garden to hide when predators come. Planting evergreens and thickly branched shrubs such as hawthorn and serviceberry provide that cover.

Birds also need food for their fledglings so planting an oak, upon which many small



▲ Nannyberry, *Viburnum lentago*, is an excellent tree for a small yard with spring flowers, excellent fall colour and fruit for the birds (and humans). It's a native tree, growing to 15 ft., and tolerates a broad range of soils, light and moisture levels. It deserves to be used more in the landscape. It also has a dense canopy which makes it perfect for nesting sites. PHOTO BY SEAN JAMES.



▲ The Nannyberry tree showing fall colour and fruit.

PHOTO BY PAUL DEGROOT OF NVK CONNOR NURSERIES.

insects feed, is a good thing. The parental birds feed on the small insects and use those to raise their young. We think a lot about how birds need seed and nectar

but we often forget that the babies can't be raised without protein. If you don't have room for a full-sized oak tree, the very narrow Green Pillar Pin Oak

is an excellent choice, offering great fall colour and form which takes up little space.

One of the most important things to do for birds is to abandon the old gardening wisdom of cleaning up the garden in the fall. Leave perennials, especially those with good seed heads such as purple coneflower, standing throughout the winter. Not only does this provide good winter interest and helps the plants shelter themselves by holding snow, it also provides food for the birds. I even leave the odd thistle in my garden and the tall yellow spike of a plant called Common Mullein so the birds will have seed throughout the winter.

Everyone should have a water feature in the garden. A small, heated water feature provides sound and motion to the winter and also the incredible sculptures of ice. That open water source is invaluable for birds and you'll be amazed at how many visit and drink from the feature. It's important that it have perching spots and be shallow enough along the edges from which they can safely drink.

It's interesting to me that many of the things that are good for birds and make them feel safe, also make the garden more beautiful. Isn't it amazing how Mother Nature's great tapestry simply looks more beautiful when we work *within* her designs? Perhaps it's a subtle, primitive psychological trick, knowing that if the birds feel safe, there must be no predators around. This makes us feel subconsciously, more safe and allows us to enjoy our gardens more. Give it a try. Let me know what you think. **NEV**

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