Habitat Gifts for Songbirds

Photo by David Copps: Songbird habitat

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This holiday season don’t forget your wild friends -- especially those colorful characters that drink from the birdbath, hang on the feeder, and sing from all corners of your yard. Songbirds provide us gifts all year long with their beautiful colors, songs and movements. Why not give back this holiday season with some habitat landscaping practices to keep them happy and healthy?

Create a mini-woodland under a large shade tree or group of trees where you’ve had trouble maintaining turf grass. Let leaves stay on the ground to create a rich carpet of mulch. This will harbor holiday snacks in the way of insects and seeds for brown thrashers, towhees, and other ground-feeding birds. Plant a variety of understory trees, shrubs, and groundcovers to create the desirable multi-layered woodland structure. More layers provide more feeding and nesting opportunities for songbirds and other wildlife. Construct a brushpile with fallen limbs and winter prunings. This gift of cover will be particularly appreciated by over-wintering house wrens and white-throated sparrows.

Enhance hedges on the borders of your property by mixing in some fruiting shrubs. Beautyberry, yaupon holly, and sumac provide much needed high-energy food for songbirds during the winter when there are fewer protein-rich insects to feast upon. Wax myrtle is another good addition to the hedgerow. Its small, long lasting fruits are particularly attractive to yellow-rumped warblers and ruby-crowned kinglets.

Create a thicket in a back corner of your yard to provide the gift of shrubby cover that is so important for songbirds and other critters. A tight grouping of cherry laurel, red cedar,
cabbage palm and wild plum, laced through with vines like yellow jessamine and coral honeysuckle, provides thick cover needed to escape predators and harsh winter winds. The gift of dense thickets and hedgerows lasts long into the spring and summer as these are the preferred nesting sites for cardinals, mockingbirds and other shrub nesters.

Provide a patch of meadow with native grasses and wildflowers. Switch grass, broomsedge, and love grass mixed with narrow-leaf sunflower, blazing star, mist flower and goldenrod provides a rich variety of seeds and insects. Flocks of goldfinches will suddenly arrive to feast in these patches and then disappear just as quickly. Sparrows are fun to watch as they work their way down the stalks of broomsedge picking out the tiny seeds. Chickadees do the same on dried sunflower seed heads, bobbing up and down as they pick and probe for their meal.

Don’t forget to give yourself a habitat gift by creating a feeding and watering station that can be easily seen from the house or patio. Provide feeders for seed and suet along with a bird bath or misting pool to attract a wide variety of songbirds. You’ll be rewarded throughout the year with hours of close-up viewing.

Habitat landscaping is truly a gift that keeps on giving. When you provide for wildlife they give back with sounds, colors and interesting behaviors that will enrich your life through the seasons and through the years.

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