On quiet mornings, in the comfort of a sunroom chair, I love to watch the birds in our garden collecting twigs, petals, and pine straw to build their nests. Waiting to be delighted by their baby’s first flights, I think of how the environment we create, both large and small, affects our lives. As my college age children pack their cars and spread their wings for a new term with new adventures, I realize the connections we make by creating a welcoming habitat both at home and in the garden can enrich our daily lives.

It is so easy to invite birds into your garden by providing shelter, food and water. The latter is the easiest and most important. Place a birdbath or shallow saucer near some shelter or shade (that birdbath in the hot driveway flower bed is a lovely focal point but is uninviting to your feathered friends) and keep it clean. A dripper on the birdbath makes cleaning automatic. Birds love to frolic in a water mister, preening, cleaning, and chirping. Lay a bed of pea gravel or rock under the mister and tuck-in water loving plants like torenia, arborvitae fern, sedges or Louisiana iris. Be sure to add a timer to conserve water.

The easiest way to provide shelter is to leave some of your garden to the birds. Leave the thicket, noninvasive vines, and native trees on the property edge unconquered. Years ago a dying sweetgum outside my sunroom window was trimmed to a 20 foot trunk creating an instant playground for woodpeckers and chickadees. If you have a courtyard garden or small space select a yaupon holly, Japanese maple or any specimen with good form and cover for our resident birds and seasonal visitors. Of course, a little wren will ignore all the planning and build a nest in the cozy tool shed the one time you leave the door unlatched.

Some gardeners and birds enjoy man-made bird houses. Purple martins are wonderful guests, gobbling up pesky mosquitoes in the garden. Bluebirds and wood ducks also enjoy boxes posted for their use. For each tenant determine their preferences – nesting height, spacing, security – and then place the houses where you can peak at the babies since that is half the fun.
It is fortunate that birds enjoy snacking on an array of seeds and berries. When selecting plants for the landscape try to choose ones that add to the bird buffet. Plant a corner of the yard with pyracantha, then hope you are home when the cedar waxwings arrive in late winter. In spring, enjoy the white bracts of dogwoods which form the berries for cardinals in fall. Hedges of holly, myrtle, and viburnum give shelter and food for the birds while a fig tree feeds us both. Even better, birds dine on slugs, grubs and other bugs. This is nature in balance and we can all contribute to this effort by carefully choosing disease and insect controls and using them sparingly.

Having the birds accept your invitation to morning coffee or afternoon tea is always a joy. Some birds are ground feeders, easily accommodated by millet or cracked corn on a platform feeder, tree stump or flat stone. I particularly enjoy the variety of birds feasting on a good sunflower seed mix from a large pole feeder. For the fortunate, the enchanting hummingbird flits from flower to feeder, dancing across the garden. Salvias, firebush, porterweed, firespike (cardinal guard) are in full bloom now and will greet more migrating hummers in fall. Hanging feeders of sugar water on decks and near kitchen windows will bring these tiny birds close for viewing!