

Keep Hummingbird Feeders Up Through Migration Season



Photo by Glenda Simmons: Female ruby-throated hummingbird visits flowers on a firebush (*Hamelia patens*).

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“When should I take my hummingbird feeder down?” I am asked this question every autumn. The questioner is usually concerned that she will keep “her” hummingbirds here too long, disrupting their natural pattern of migration.

The Ruby-throated Hummingbird, the only species of hummingbird that nests here, migrates to Central America each fall. The ones that nested in Tallahassee will migrate soon, but so will birds that nested farther north. There is a succession of birds passing through that may stop at your plants and feeders in the fall.

Most ornithologists and hummingbird researchers that I have talked to assure me that hummingbirds will migrate with or without your feeder and plants. However those plants and feeders are a valuable source of energy for the diminutive birds stocking up for their long trip to Central America each year.

So my answer to the above question is to leave your feeder up until you notice that no birds are using it. Of course, this means cleaning it regularly. My advice for those who want to see hummingbirds up close is to plant lots of nectar rich plants for them.

Cardinal guard, also known as firespike, is one of the best perennials for attracting hummingbirds in late summer and autumn. It is in full bloom by September, sporting abundant red tubular flowers loaded with nectar. Cardinal guard prefers a lightly shaded spot. We planted ours on the north side of the house near a window and another at the end of our front porch, so we can watch hummingbirds up close from our rocking chairs. Other good hummingbird plants in our yard that continue to bloom into autumn are shrimp plant, *Salvia guaranitica*, red pentas, firebush, Mexican sunflower, cigarette plant, pineapple sage and ironweed.

Other excellent choices are lantana, butterfly bush, hummingbird plant (*Dicliptera*), cigar plant, false gloxinia (*Sinningia*) and all salvias.

Some folks in Tallahassee leave their feeders up all winter to attract other species of hummingbirds, such as the Rufous Hummingbird, that migrate here from the West and spend the winter feeding on sugar water from feeders, insects, nectar from perennials that overwinter due to recent mild winters, natural winter blooming plants and sap from sap wells drilled by Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. If you decide to leave a feeder up over the winter, you will need to clean it regularly, though not as often as a summer feeder.

If you host a winter migrant hummingbird, please report it to Fred Bassett of The Hummer Bird Study Group, fhound@aol.com. He will make an effort to visit your home to band the bird for their research on hummingbird migration. He will present a program on Winter Hummingbirds at Native Nurseries on January 9, 2010.

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