

Attracting Hummingbirds to Your Garden

Hummingbirds are the sparkling jewels of the sky and to have them in your own garden is a priceless treasure! The Buff-bellied Hummingbird is our only year-round resident. It is one of the larger hummingbird species and is quickly identified by its red bill and green throat. Its breeding season is from March to July. Records show that the Buff-bellied population in the Lower Rio Grande Valley is declining due to loss of our natural habitat, particularly dense shrubs.

Two other hummingbird species (Ruby-throated and Black-chinned) spend a lot of time in our area during their migration periods. The Ruby-throated Hummingbird is the only species that occurs in the eastern half of the United States. The adult male has a red throat, green head and green back. The female has a white breast and green head and back. Migration northwards is from February to mid-May, and southward migration is July to October.

The Black-chinned Hummingbird is a western species. The adult male has a black chin bordered by a band of purple iridescence. The female has a clear white breast and throat and an all green back. Northward migration is mid-March to mid-May and southward migration is mid-August to November.

Water, dense shrubs and nectar plants will bring Hummingbirds to your garden.

Water is an important part of a hummingbird habitat. Hummingbirds love running water, so a fountain or even a sprinkler will be appreciated. They will actually fly through a sprinkler just to cool off. These birds expend a tremendous amount of energy,

so they need water to keep their little engines from overheating. Bird baths and ponds that have shallow areas will also attract these jewels.

Dense shrubbery is very important for several reasons. Hummingbirds spend a lot of time catching insects from spider webs, the air, and all around leaves and branches. Naturally most insects will be found in a dense plant population. Studies also show that hummingbirds prefer to mate in dense shrubs.

The spider silk, lichen, and other materials used to build nests can only be found among shrubs and trees that are active with bird and insect life. The many species of native shrubs and trees fulfill this role. (Hummingbirds especially like the downy fiber of seeds, such as those of the willow tree, for nesting material.) By planting with our Valley natives you can create a mini-replica of the habitat that has historically existed to support these delicate creatures. The thorny branches of our native Lower Rio Grande Valley shrubs and small trees also provide protection to the nest from predatory creatures, especially city cats.

Hummingbirds can live up to twelve years, although most live three to four years.

Hummingbirds reuse their old nests, so it is possible to have the same family residing several years in your backyard. A habitat created with the proper plants will encourage the presence of the migratory species and hopefully increase the population of our resident Buff-bellied species!

To form the framework of your hummingbird garden, choose as many of the following **native shrubs and trees**: Tamaulipan Fiddlewood, Black Brush, Texas Kidneywood, Desert Yaupon, Brush Holly, Sugar Hackberry, Honey Mesquite, Texas

Ebony, Anacahuita, Texas Persimmon, Western Soapberry, Texas Huisache, Black Willow, Coyote Willow, Tenaza, Manzanita, Yellow Sophora, Texas Torchwood, White Brush, Brasil, Snake-eyes, Texas Mountain Laurel and Sierra Madre Torchwood Drummond's Turk's cap, Guayacan and Granjeno. The Native Plant Project's handbooks on native trees and native shrubs contain colored pictures and planting details, etc. (Ask at the counter of your local retail nursery or call the Valley Nature Center 956-969-2475 in Weslaco, Texas to order these handbooks via the mail.) Mix slower-growing trees with the faster growing shrubs. It pays to be patient, since the right plants will really make a difference in the long run. For example, the Texas Ebony tree is slow-growing, but its value as an evergreen and its density make it worth the time it takes to grow.

Nectar plants provide the hummingbirds' primary diet. Hummingbirds like many colors of flowers not just red ones. But they are especially attracted to tubular shaped flowers. The important thing is to have flowers in bloom throughout the year. Diversity is the key here. By planting a minimum of six to ten different plant species year-round blooming can be achieved and most of our native plants bloom continually. These should be planted in sun to partial, and in large groups. Our native nectar plants are: Agave, Bee Balm, Coral Bean, Shrubby Blue Sage, Texas Lantana, Oregano, Wild Petunia, Tournefortia, Colima, Barreta, Texas Paintbrush, Coma, and two very popular but shade loving plants Drummond's Turk's Cap and Tropical Sage.

There are many non-native nectar plants to choose from; some such as Shrimp plant and Butterfly weed (milkweed), Firebush, Canna, Begonias, Nicotiana, Four O'clock, Impatiens, Day Lillies, Zinnias, Dahlia, Geranium, Butterfly Bush (Budelia). Hummingbirds also make use of many flowering vines such as the Passion Vines,

Honeysuckle, Morning Glory and Trumpet Creeper (potentially aggressive with abundant rain).

(Sources: *The Sabal*, Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 1433 Edinburg, TX. 78540- Joe

Ideker, editor; *The Hummingbird Book* by Donald and Lillian Stokes).

Article written by the Cameron County Horticulture Education Committee.

Questions or Comments write to: Cameron County Master Gardeners

Association, 1390 W. Expressway 83, San Benito, TX 78586-3869.

Phone: 956-361-8236 or Fax: 956-361-8289 or email:

cameroncountymastergardeners@gmail.com