

Hummingbird Gardens (published 2026-08-08)

By Kate O'Lenic, Master Gardener

Hummingbirds are gorgeous and fascinating creatures. Most hummingbirds are up to 5 inches long. The tiniest is only 2 inches long. And the pearlescent shine of their feathers is due to the pigmentation and tiny cells that act like prisms. The common name is a nod to the sound of their wings that move so quickly, up to 80 beats per second, that we hear a hum. These tiny birds can fly up to 30 miles per hour straight, upside down or backwards. Their tiny hearts beat over 1,000 times per minute. It's no surprise that these high energy birds need to feed constantly and in very large amounts. Flower nectar is a substantial source of sugars needed to sustain them. Their diet also includes insects as a source of protein. Soft-bodied insects like mosquitoes, spiders, gnats, fruit flies, small bees, aphids and their larvae and eggs can be attracted to an area in your yard that is left unmown and natural.

These little dynamos also migrate between northern summer homes and their winter homes in warm climates. From late March to mid-May, hummingbirds begin arriving in Tennessee. In early May eggs are in nests. Nestlings start appearing in late May, and by mid-June, fledglings are seen. Being aware of this timing ensures that you can have feeders out by April first to help feed the birds before adequate flower nectar is present.

Hummingbird feeders provide sugar water to keep the birds happy. For moderate temperatures, a mixture of 3 to 4 parts water and 1 part white granulated sugar is recommended. In hot, dry weather, use a more dilute solution of 4 to 5 parts water to 1 part sugar. The sugar solution needs to be replaced and the feeder cleaned once a week or more often in hot weather. To clean, use hot water or water and vinegar. Avoid soaps as they may leave a residue

NEVER, EVER use red dye or other additives in the solution. Red dyes can cause kidney failure in hummingbirds.

The flowers that hummingbirds are most attracted to are red and orange. There is an interesting reason why these colors attract them. It has to do with competition. Bees cannot see reds and oranges and go to other flowers instead. So, the reds and oranges are far less crowded with other pollinators. These flowers also produce sugar in the form of sucrose that is most beneficial to the birds.

They will feed on other flowers and the best way to attract hummingbirds to your yard is by providing a diversity of plants. It is also beneficial to provide trees or tall shrubs for them to nest in and a supply of clean water. Avoid using pesticides. Many insecticides kill insects that the birds supplement their diet with.

Native plants are preferred because hummingbirds evolved with the native plants in their home areas. Hummingbirds would love it if you planted their favorite flowers grouped together rather than scattered around an area. They also like to visit plants in containers and window boxes. So, if you have a small space, you can still draw hummingbirds to you.

Spring Blooming Plants: To ensure plenty of food for hummingbirds, plan your garden to have flowers blooming at different times. It is a great idea to have plenty of early bloomers like columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), and wild blue phlox (*Phlox divaricata*) for our feathered friends. Red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*) is a tree with red tubular flowers that also provides nectar for the spring migration.

Summer Flowers: Beebalm, especially scarlet beebalm (*Monarda didyma*) are very attractive to hummingbirds. Eastern smooth beardtongue (*Penstemon laevigatus*) has the tubular shape that hummingbirds are well-adapted for. And cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) with its stunning red flowers is a well-loved favorite, too. Fire pink (*Silene virginica*) also produces vivid red flowers from late spring through late summer. Scarlet sage (*Salvia coccinea*) is an annual in zone 7a but reseeds easily and it flowers from early summer until frost.

Fall Blooms: Asters are a great go-to for fall flowers to feed hummingbirds. New England aster (*Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*) is showy from August until frost. Appalachian ironweed (*Veronia glauca*) is quite the multi-tasker. It draws in bees, butterflies and hummingbirds. Its seeds are a food source for birds. The hollow stems, if left in the garden trimmed down to 12 to 24 inches, provide a nesting site for bees.

There are several shrubs for your hummingbird garden, too. Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) flowers from June to September, mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) puts on a show in early to mid-summer, and sweet pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*) is another summer bloomer. All are great native shrubs to provide food and shelter to hummingbirds.

Resources

“Hummingbirds in the Garden,” <https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/hummingbirds-in-the-garden/>

“How to Create a Hummingbird-Friendly Yard,” <https://www.audubon.org/community-science/hummingbirds/how-create-hummingbird-friendly-yard>

“How to Make Hummingbird Nectar,” <https://www.audubon.org/news/how-make-hummingbird-nectar>

“Attracting Hummingbirds to Your Garden Using Native Plants,” <https://www.fs.usda.gov/wildflowers/pollinators/documents/AttractingHummingbirdsFS-1046April2015.pdf>

“Hummingbird Gardening in Tennessee,” <https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/W305.pdf>

How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to

send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.