

Bird-friendly Gardens



Having a bird-friendly garden will give great pleasure to both faith community members and visitors alike. It can also benefit the larger neighbourhood. Birds provide colour and animation to a garden, introduce melody and beauty and also help keep insect populations in check. They support healthy flora ecology by helping move seeds around and aid in pollinating flowers. There are many social and ecological benefits to birds, and they help bridge the connection to nature that enriches so many lives.

Wildlife including birds is supported in three ways: food, shelter, and water. The level that these needs are provided for will determine the appeal of your landscape to birds, and therefore how many birds you will attract. Cities harbour approximately twenty percent of the world's birds and support even more during migrating periods (Aronson et al., 2014). Birds on their northerly and southerly routes seek out rest stops and locations to "refuel" and while any green vegetation can suffice, those that offer protective cover, taller trees or native shrubs with berries are the most desirable. Even if these rest stops are only used for a few hours twice a year, they are vital to these migrants and are worth considering for your landscape.

How to Start

First determine what the congregation can manage depending on funding, resources and volunteers. The Outdoor Greening primer provides a detailed guide of what to consider when starting a new gardening project. Identify specific goals for your bird-friendly garden such as transforming one garden bed to grow flowers that provide seeds for birds or adding a small grouping of shrubs and trees to help migrating birds, or simply start by reviewing maintenance and operating tasks to see if they can be changed to better support our feathered friends. Some of these goals may help other wildlife also and/or enable your garden to become more sustainable.

When the desire is to support wildlife, consider quieter areas of the property so as not to unnecessarily disturb the wildlife that visits your property. Choose a garden bed that isn't too close to regular foot traffic or busy roads and/or locate new habitat in a quieter area that is in full view from the inside of the faith building. This allows congregants the opportunity to view and enjoy

without disturbing the birds. If the interest is to create a prayer/meditation spot within the wildlife area, provide seating that offers a lovely view in a spot that won't disturb the birds too much.

What follows are three levels of gardens that will support birds depending on the size of your property and the resources and volunteers that will support the project.

Light Level

Easy up on maintenance:

Keep leaves on the ground in at least one area of your landscape. This can be done for a garden bed at the back or at the edges of lawn especially if you have trees on the perimeter of your property. Leaves provide shelter for insects and places to overwinter therefore providing food for ground-foraging birds such as thrushes. The leaves should be left for the autumn and winter season and cleaned up in the spring.

Don't cut flower blooms or grasses in the fall.

Seed flowers (such as Coneflower, Beebalm, Black-eyed Susan, Wild senna, Coreopsis) offer much needed nourishment for birds in the winter. If it's not possible to keep garden beds unmaintained in your front beds, consider having a flower bed in the back that will provide seeds in the winter.

Take an Inventory of Your Gardens and Property:

Determine what native perennials you have that attract birds. They can be flowers that have desirable seedheads like Sunflowers (or others listed above) or they can be red and orange flowers that attract hummingbirds (Beebalm, Cardinal flower.)



Trees and shrubs are also a food source for birds. Determine what native shrubs and trees you have currently that provide seeds and/or berries. When these plants flower they can also provide nutrients for certain birds by attracting insects that are desirable to insectivores.

Places to nest, take shelter or hide are also beneficial to birds. Certain trees and shrubs can also provide shelter, nesting locations and quick cover. Evergreens such as Cedars, Pines and Spruces can offer shelter and native shrubs with thorns offer a safe place for small birds to get away from predators.

Support what you already have on your property:

Trees and shrubs do benefit from a bit of extra nutrients from time to time. Consider providing a light layer of compost once a year in the early spring or late fall. Use caution when you fertilize grass within the crown of the tree – some flowering shrubs and small trees don't do well with lawn fertilizer.

Protect the root area from compaction and damage. Do not allow heavy equipment to be stored within the crown area and watch when excavating near trees so as not to damage roots.

Trees may need watering during droughts. Although they don't show it, trees can be heavily affected during long period droughts. Their stress will only be seen in the next growing season. To avoid this, consider watering them during droughts - especially evergreens. Do some research on what is on the property to determine which trees need the extra water. Refer to Native Trees and Shrubs Fact Sheet for more information.

Plant Perennials or one Natives Shrub:

Add a few perennials to your current garden beds. All of the flowering perennials listed above like full sun. Mix them in with your current flowers and allow seedheads to remain for the birds to find and enjoy.

Find room for a native shrub. If you have room (approximately 1.5 m or 2 m squared) consider a native shrub that offers berries (Dogwood,

Nannyberry) or seeds (Witch Hazel, Ninebark). It can also do double duty and provide safe shelter if it has thorns also (wild rose, wild raspberry, hawthorns). There are suitable native shrubs for both sun and shade and some that are more compact if desired.

Keep it low-maintenance and don't prune. If you are planting one for the wildlife, plant it in a less visible area where regular maintenance would not be required. This will also ensure that the location is quieter and more appealing to birds.

Consider offering nest building material:

This is a fun and simple *Care for Creation* activity for children. Cut out two sides of a small cream carton and stuff in material for birds including: straw, animal fur, cotton balls and scrap wool yarn (ensure strands are short, up to 5 cms at most). Do not offer any plastic, nylon or synthetic materials including dryer lint. Dryer lint is NOT a good nesting material as it has synthetic chemicals and absorbs moisture which can easily chill baby birds without feathers.

Medium Level

If you have a larger property, memorial garden or burial ground and/or more resources and time to create a bird-friendly garden consider these steps:

Avoid chemicals when buying your annuals and perennials. Some garden centres have been found to sell flowering plants that contain neonicotinoids. Consider buying organic flowers to guarantee pesticide-free vegetation. This harms not only bees but birds also. In Ottawa you can go to Fletcher Wildlife Gardens Annual plant sale, Greta's Organic Gardens and Make It Green Garden Centre.

Think about adding vines if the only space available is vertical. Native vines can easily be added to the back of a garden bed (just add some wire or a make-shift string trellis) or at the base of a shrub (which they can climb). Choose an annual like Wild Cucumber or Allegheny Vine or other non-aggressive vine such as the Groundnut if you don't want to be cutting it back all the time.

Add a new garden bed or a grouping of shrubs if you do have space. Many flowers that offer birds



seeds and nectar are sunshine loving plants so pick a sunny location and dig a new bed. See the Outdoor Greening Primer for details. Add a small grouping of shrubs (3, 5 or more) that offer a variety of food and shelter for birds and that bloom at various times.

Add a tree or two depending on your available space. Remember to consider the size of the full grown tree when choosing a sapling. Newly planted trees need extra support for the first few years including extra nutrients and water. More details in the Trees and Shrubs Fact Sheet.

Offer fabricated bird boxes for nesting and shelter. These can be built by volunteers using online how-to-guides or can be bought from local organizations (such as Innis Point Bird Observatory, Ottawa Stewardship Council) or stores. Consider your local habitat and what birds would be attracted and where placement would be. Nest boxes need to be cleaned out annually.

Consider offering the endangered Ontario Chimney Swift a nesting site. Many older institutional buildings built before 1950, may have a suitable chimney for this bird to nest in. These birds provide a benefit to cities by eating many airborne insects. Swifts and building owners can coexist as there is no damage to chimneys, little noise, no mess and the nests are not a fire hazard. Do not cap, wire over or line your chimney and do all chimney maintenance between October 15th and April 15th. And check for swifts before you use chimney/furnace – due to any cold spells after April 15th!

Deep Level

Consider these actions if you have actively engaged volunteers who want to support birds weekly and/or a large area that could be transformed which could be bequeathed land or a quieter spot in a cemetery.

Offer water and/or bird seed to attract birds. Offering organic (non-pesticide) seed is the best (but does cost more). Bird feeders and bird baths need to be cleaned regularly. These should be placed very close to windows (less than 1 metre) or at least 9 metres away from any windows to prevent birds from striking windows at a high

speed.

Create a pond or water feature that birds can visit. A pond with a recirculating pump is the best as this will keep water fresh and the sound of moving water attracts birds. Other water features to consider are decorative fountains that can be added to a garden or a small container water garden which is easy-to-make with a small pump. Keep in mind that maintenance and cleaning are required.

Take advantage of a flat or low sloped roof. Flat or low-sloped roofs can be transformed into green roofs either as an extensive or intensive design and increase habitat for insects and birds. Extensive ones are less weight (including consideration of saturated weight) and are typically designed not be walked on, whereas intensive green roofs support more complex garden systems. The first step is to have an engineer come to determine what load-bearing capacity your roof has before anything is added.

Transform a part of the property into a meadow. Native prairie habitat is an uncommon habitat in urban settings and also becoming scarce in natural settings also. If your property is large enough consider converting part of it to an urban meadow. It can be started by allowing an area to renaturalize with some native additions or a more deliberate effort can be done with a multi-year plan and lots of weeding. See the Urban Meadow fact sheet for more details.

Make your building and windows bird friendly. If you do have windows that have been a danger to birds, consider keeping drapes closed, moving any indoor plants away from window and/or adding bird some type of bird deterrent such as decals, films or UV technology that birds can see but is virtually undetectable to humans.





Links / Further Info:

BCIT – Centre for Architecture Ecology :
commons.bcit.ca/greenroof/faq/why-green-roofs-benefits

Fatal Light Awareness Program Canada (FLAP) :
www.flap.org/residential_new.php

Native Plant Crossroads – Garden for Birds :
dev.nature.ca/plnt/res/lft_sgb_e.cfm

Ontario Nature – Chimney Swifts :
www.onnaturemagazine.com/chimney-swift.html

Wild Ones – Stopover Ecology :
www.wildones.org/download/stopover/stopover.html

A global analysis of the impacts of urbanization on bird and plant diversity reveals key anthropogenic drivers. Co-author Dr Nick Williams, from Melbourne University
rspb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/281/1780/20133330

