



## The Backyard Opera

SETTING THE STAGE FOR SONGBIRDS

BY | SUSAN MARY DOWD

THE HIGH-PITCHED song of a Yellow-Rumped Warbler. The love duet of Eastern Meadowlarks in the midst of courtship. It's a real opera out there—all music, drama and color—and you'll find it wherever songbirds dwell. Want to attract more of these fine, feathered stars to your backyard? Then be their set designer. Bring in the three things they need to thrive—water, food, and

shelter—and you'll enjoy a long season of great performances.

**WATER** Nothing attracts songbirds like water. In fact, you'll see birds at your water feature that never make an appearance at your seed feeders. Want that water feature to be a veritable bird magnet? Make the water splash, spray, trickle or cascade, and those keen eyes and

ears (ear holes, actually) will home in on it, well, like a homing pigeon.

You can use a ready-made birdbath with an integrated fountain, or get creative and design, on your own or with professional help, a shallow pond or a waterfall with a re-circulating pump. Just make sure the water is no deeper than 2 ½ inches. In winter, drinking water is even more critical to birds'

survival than food so invest in a submersible heating element to keep ice from forming.

**FOOD** Sunflower seed is your mainstay since it attracts the greatest number of songbirds, particularly chickadees, nuthatches, downy woodpeckers, and cardinals. Goldfinches and other finches prefer tiny thistle seeds. Use tube feeders with short perches for small birds, and platform feeders for larger birds like cardinals and robins.

However, not all birds eat seeds. A nice juicy orange slice will whet the whistle of Baltimore Orioles and Scarlet Tanagers. Dried cherries say "Come and get it" to Eastern Bluebirds, as do mealworms, which you can purchase at a pet store. Sugar water draws hummingbirds, but a more aesthetically pleasing route is installing plants with tubular-shaped flowers, such as Foxglove, Columbine and Morning Glory, to attract them. Mix annuals and perennials so something is always blooming. And include plants that produce berries, too. But, for your garden's sake, be selective. Brian Cossari, landscape architect at Hoffman Landscapes in Wilton recommends using native plants instead of invasive ones that spread out of control. "In Connecticut, birds like Cedar Waxwings, Robins, and Northern Flickers like the berries of Euonymus, an invasive East

Asian import, but a much better choice would be Winterberry or Holly," he says. Suet cakes also delight these species as well as other insect eaters like woodpeckers and warblers.

**SHELTER** You can provide natural or man-made shelter. Trees and shrubs that are dense on the outside and have open spaces within serve as natural shelters, protecting songbirds from predators and the elements, especially freezing wind. Tall conifer trees and conifer shrubs such as cedar and juniper, broad-leafed evergreen shrubs like bayberry and holly, and large, thick deciduous shrubs provide concealment and buffer the weather.

Man-made shelters like birdhouses attract chickadees, wrens, and tufted titmice and smaller birds that naturally make their homes in tree cavities. The little guys are particular about their digs, though; the size of the entry hole, as well as the shape and size of the house have to be just so. Consult bird catalogs to find the right house for the right bird.

Birdhouses installed on metal poles are less vulnerable to predators than those hung or nailed on trees. Make sure the house is at least 10 feet away from dense shrubbery, which can conceal predators.

Attracting songbirds takes a commitment on your part, but it's well worth the investment. You'll always have season tickets to the finest in backyard opera. And one more thing—those gorgeous arias are usually sung only by the male birds. It's all about finding or communicating with a mate. The females sit and listen, approving or criticizing, as the case may be. Even here, opera has its critics. ■

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