

Landscape Design for our Feathered Friends in Southern Utah.

By Tony McCammon

Attracting a variety of birds to your landscape is as easy as providing for the birds basic needs, namely food, water, shelter, and nesting sites. If your target species are the native birds, do not think bird feeders will interest them. Research suggests non-native species will dominate the feeding troughs urban gardens set out for them. Environmentally and genetically, bird feeders are not good for them. Non-native species have a tendency to pass along diseases, harm, or displace native species at bird feeders. Native southern Utah birds found in and around urban sites such as verdin, towhee, and goldfinch are less likely to visit bird feeders, as their main diet historically is based on native plants. In this article let's discuss the landscape characteristics and plant species that can be used to create a bird lovers sanctuary for our feathered friends.

Native Plants

Native plants in southern Utah provide everything year round the native bird species need. They are well adapted to our soils and weather conditions, use less resources, and benefit insects and wildlife. Simply adding these plants into existing landscapes or renovating the entire yard can provide food, shelter, and nesting sites for native birds. Exotic plants may be beautiful and add some value to your landscape for resale, but if birds do not like them and they don't feel safe, then they will not visit. Visit the Audubon [Plant Data Base](#) to see what species will be attracted with each plant.

TREES:

Desert Willow (*Chilopsis linearis*) forms thickets with cottonwoods and nonnative tamarisk in washes throughout southern Utah. It is readily sold in the landscape trade. The tree form can reach 25' tall. Flowers are used by hummingbirds for nectar in the spring. Many bird species use this tree for breeding and nesting. In the fall seeds are eaten by many birds including the Gambel's Quail.

Pinyon Pine (*Pinus monophylum*) is so popular among birds for its nuts the Pinyon Jay was named after it. That, and the Pinyon Jay is nomadic and flocks stay within earshot of a pine cone falling to the ground. Many of the forests in the foothills are pinyon-Juniper forests. Growth to 20' tall in irrigated situations, very slow grower. Pinyons are not as easy to find in the Nursery trade and need to be special ordered. Try Big Tree Nursery in Kanaraville.

New Mexico Locust (*Robinia neomexicana*) Is a large bush or small tree, growth to 10'. Clusters of drooping bright fuchsia colored blooms are a welcome in our desert landscapes in the spring. Hummingbirds love the nectar, while quail, grouse, pheasant, and wild turkey eat the seeds.

Velvet Mesquite (*Prosopis velutina*) and the better know in the landscape trade, non-native evergreen version, Chilean Mesquite are used by birds for their breeding, nesting, roosting sites, and insects living within the foliage, bark, and flowers. The mesquite's seeds and sweet fleshy pods are eaten by doves, quail, and other birds. These mesquites are thorny and offer protection to birds from predators. Mesquites can get 25' tall.

Palo Verde (*Cercidium x 'Desert Museum'*) Is not native to Utah but is to the surrounding states and many of the bird species will be familiar with it. Hummingbirds, mourning doves, and white wing doves find them an ideal tree to nest and raise their young. Quail roost at night. Consider Desert Museum cultivar. Easy to find in the nursery trade. Grows to 30' tall.

SHRUBS:

Below is a list of excellent native shrubs that are easy to find for your design. Shrubs have woody stems and roots. They offer food either from fruit, leaves, or insects that live on the plant. They also provide nesting material and cover. Some shrubs like the Cholla make safe perching locations. Native plants tend to have a gray or dusty green color to their leaves. Adding 3 or 4 species to this list with other exotic shrubs with dark green colors can accomplish a beautiful landscape design.

1. Apache Plume (*Fallugia paradoxa*)
2. Creosotebush (*Larrea tridentate*)

3. Fernbush (*Chamaebatiaria millefolium*)
4. Honeysuckle (*Lonicera utahensis*)
5. Rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus viscidiflorus*)
6. Skunk Bush Sumac (*Rhus trilobata*)
7. Four-Wing Saltbush (*Atriplex canescens*)
8. Sand Sage (*Artemisia filifolia*)
9. Pink Fairy Duster (*Calliandra eriophylla*)
10. Parry's Agave (*Agave Parrii*)
11. Prickly Pear (*Opuntia engelmannii*)
12. Cholla (*Cylindropuntia fulgida*)

PERENNIALS:

Perennials are plants that have fibrous root systems and tend to live more than 2 years. The term is also widely used to distinguish plants with little or no woody growth from trees and shrubs, which are also technically perennials. In our hot desertscape these are shorter lived than in cooler climates so a little filtered shade from one of the trees above will help them last longer. My favorite is the Penstemon species. We have more than 50 species in Utah to choose from all are popular for bird activity. Check out my book on the king of the wildflower [here](#). Birds use these plants mainly as a food source and for debris for nesting construction.

1. Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*)
2. Desert Lavender (*Hyptis emoryi*)
3. Desert 4 O'clock (*Mirabilis multiflora*)
4. Firecracker Penstemon, Palmers, or Parry's (*Penstemon sp.*)
5. Sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*)
6. Salvia (*Salvia officinalis*)
7. Desert Marigold (*Baileya multiradiata*)
8. Globe Mallow (*Sphaeralcea ambigua*)
9. Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)
10. Evening Primrose (*Oenothera caespitosa*)

Design Elements

Design elements like creating rooms, traffic flow, contour, along with the plant selection with a variety of textures color and form will determine the aesthetic value of the landscape. Elements that will determine the

visitation frequency of bird life are water features, Dense foliage locations, layered or tiered vegetation, and bare soil with debris matter.

1. Water features should be low at varying heights. This will create safe environments for bird foragers who like to stay in the understory of shrubs and also for those that prefer the open. Place rocks or bricks in the water feature so the birds have something at water level they can perch on. Running water is not necessary, but clean water is.
2. A few areas of the design should be dense enough to shield birds from hawks, cats, and other predators. This is also a safe roosting and nesting spot, so design them near a window where from your perch you can see their smiling beaks. In these dense areas be sure to layer the growth. Trees shrubs and perennials can be used to create the different tiers of growth for all bird preferences.
3. Whereas some birds prefer foraging on the ground keep some areas under trees or in the dense location free of weed barrier or rock material so birds can scratch and find insects or other food sources in the soil like they do in their native environment.

More Bird Brained Tips

1. I recommend choosing 2 trees, 6 shrubs, and 4 perennials from my suggestions and replicating them in your landscape trying to group the bird lovers together. Choose another 7-10 plants from local nurseries that fit the theme you are trying to accomplish in the design.
2. Design plants in 1, 3, and 5's, never planting in a straight line. Always stagger plants slightly, even in a contemporary design. Plants are meant to soften our new age contemporary home designs, not accentuate it.
3. Design with your viewing pleasure in mind. Include bird friendly areas near patios or outside large windows.
4. Add birdhouses, water features, ornamental snags, landscape art and a vegetable garden.
5. Do not add too many up-lights, fire features, or reflective objects.
6. Call a Landscape Designer/Architect if your project is larger than .25 acre.
7. Look up these resources: <https://www.audubon.org/news/how-make-your-yard-bird-friendly-0>

<https://forestry.usu.edu/news/utah-forest-facts/how-to-create-a-wildlife-friendly-yard>

About the Author:

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