



Trees and Shrubs For Birds

by Marilyn Loser

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“A Common thread that runs through the fabric of America is our love for wildlife,” according to the Arbor Day Foundation (ADF). But as our country becomes more urban, sharing it with wildlife takes understanding and planning – and not surprisingly, trees play an important role.

With a little planning, the benefits we expect from trees can be multiplied to also benefit wildlife. While urban wildlife includes many species of birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects, and fish, this article will focus on birds. The ADF says birds need three things: food, cover, and water.

After perusing various bulletins, books, and websites, I’ve come up with the following suggestions for shrubs and trees that grow well in Alamosa and benefit birds. I briefly addressed the subject of plants that attract birds and/or butterflies in the May 10 Alamosa Flowers column. More information and images of most of these plants are posted at AlamosaTrees.net.

Most folks in Alamosa are aware of native Golden Currants (*Grossulariaceae*). Mine are just beginning to ripen and many birds love them. In a couple of weeks I’ll begin noticing dark splotches on our sidewalk as the birds are not tidy eaters! And of course, some birds like various Crabapple (*Malus*) varieties that thrive in Alamosa.

Colorado is trying to curb the spread of Russian Olive trees – in fact it is illegal to sell them in the state, but you don’t have to remove your trees. According to the Columbia University website, more than 50 different species of mammals and birds eat the fruit. This contributes to the problem of the trees replacing native vegetation. The seeds are very resilient, enduring the stomach’s digestive juices, and are distributed over the landscape by various animals – especially birds.

Dogwoods, Viburnums, Sumac, and Service Berries are lesser-known shrubs that produce late summer or fall fruit. According to the AllAboutBirds.org website, robins, bluebirds, finches, and waxwings like these. I’ve seen a lot of Red Osier Dogwood (*Cornus serica*) around town and love the one I have. Besides producing some fruit, they have beautiful flowers in spring and their reddish bark is beautiful against the snow in winter. I love Snowball bushes (*Viburnum x carlcephalum*) with their large white flower clusters in early summer. Nannyberries (*Viburnum lentago*) also have early summer white blooms, but my plants are in a fairly arid region of the garden and haven’t thrived.

I have several Squawbushes (*Rhus trilobata*), that I planted as a ground cover as it only grows about a foot tall and spreads to a diameter of six feet or more. I notice birds picking at the berries late in the winter when there isn’t much else available. I once had a Saskatoon Serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*),

but a neighbor dog pretty much destroyed it before we had a good fence installed. I loved the berries as much as the birds did!

Apparently, birds like the fruit of Hackberry trees (*Celtis occidentalis*). My Hackberry is about six years old and I've never noticed any flowers or fruit. The SoftSchools.com website says that the Hackberry tree is a monoecious plant which means it produces individual male and female flowers on the same tree. It has greenish, inconspicuous flowers arranged in drooping clusters and the peas-sized fruit is dark purple and sweet.

I know that many birds like the fruit of the Canada Red Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana* 'Shubert') as they pluck the cherries just before they ripen. I've never found one on the ground or a ripe one remaining in the tree. The lovely scent of the white flowers in spring and the foliage that turns purple in summer make this a favorite tree of mine.

Bur Oaks (*Quercus macrocarpa*) produce acorns which are eaten by blue jays and woodpeckers. I don't know how long it takes a Bur Oak to produce fruit, but mine have never developed any.

Finches are known to like the seeds of Maple trees (*Acer*) and Spruce (*Picea*). Autumn Blaze Maples, Tatarian Maples, and Colorado Blue Spruce do well in Alamosa.

Many Elms (*Ulmus*), Oaks, and Maples harbor various insects and many birds rely almost exclusively on insects for food according to the ADF. It's something I never thought of before and I doubt I'd ever buy a tree just so birds can enjoy the pests!

In a future column, I'll discuss the many ways trees protect birds and the need to provide water for birds.

"If America wishes to preserve her native birds, we must help supply what civilization has taken from them. The building of cities and towns, the cutting down of forests, and the draining of pools and swamps have deprived American birds of their original homes and food supply." John Burroughs, a literary naturalist