

Plants for Cover for Wildlife

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Now is an excellent time to plant shrubs and trees.

Most gardeners are interested in a landscape that is not only attractive but also provides habitat for birds. That habitat for birds means plants that produce berries or seeds is recognized by most gardeners. The idea that it also means the need for cover is less well known. Cover as habitat are those plants and other materials that provide a place for birds to escape predators, to build their nests, to shelter from the weather, and to search for insects.

In terms of value as cover the thicker and more extensive a planting is, the better it meets the needs of the birds. We generally think cover is provided by a number of plants massed together which is accurate, but even individual plants (or a small brush pile or rockpile) will meet the needs of some birds and may increase the birds that visit or live in your yard. Cover is also a cumulative habitat. The cover in your landscape complements other cover in the neighborhood to meet the needs of resident birds. If you inventory the available cover in the neighborhood and then fill any gaps, or just increase the cover by enhancing the habitat in your landscape, it has a good chance of increasing the numbers and species of birds that are present.

Anacua is a versatile native plant that provides food and cover for birds. It blooms in the spring and produces a small yellow berry in early summer that attracts fruit eating birds such as cardinals, mockingbirds, and house finches. In terms of cover anacua grows to at least 25 feet with a very dense evergreen crown. With minimal pruning of sprouts, it makes a single stem shade tree, or you could allow it to form a thicket. It's value as a shade tree is recognized in that it is on the CPS Shade Tree Rebate Program. To experience anacua's value as a food source for birds you just need to observe the tree when it is full of its berry crop. The plant is alive with movement as many species of birds consume the berries. You can't usually distinctly see the birds that are feeding because the foliage is so dense, but the motion is evident. Anacua is available in containers of various sizes at area nurseries.

Compared to anacua, huisache is a rougher example of cover provided by a single tree. It also grows to about 25 feet with a dense crown, but it is deciduous and has thorns. The flowers attract bees just like the anacua flowers but instead of a berry, the tree produces seed in a pod which is eaten by some birds. Huisache provides a favorite nesting spot for cardinals and doves. Huisache is not usually sold at retail nurseries. Plant it by seed or dig up a small seedling from a landscape with adult trees. Huisache aggressively reseed themselves.

A hedge can also provide bird habitat while it is increasing privacy and/or blocking an unattractive view. A row of standard Burford holly planted every 8 feet will grow to 10 feet tall makes an excellent hedge in sun or partial shade. Add a row of blue plumbago in front of the holly and it is even more attractive and has more value as wildlife cover.

The cover does not need to be evergreen to have value. An area planted with Turk's cap will drop its leaves in the winter, but it is still valuable as cover for birds that feed on the ground such as American sparrows, thrashers, and Inca doves. Similar value is derived from leaving esperanza, poinciana, firebush

and other cold sensitive plants after the tops freeze. Wait until late February or March to prune off the freeze killed stems.

Too often gardeners underestimate the value of roses to provide cover for birds. Not as much from neatly pruned hybrid tea roses as tough modern and old-fashioned roses. It is not necessary to prune them as extensively or often. They are also drought tolerant. A Mutabilis rose planted as a specimen in full sun in the landscape will reach 8 feet tall and 10 feet around to serve as cover for birds in addition to providing 9 months of blooms. For a lower growing blooming cover, grow a bed of Belinda's Dream, Katy Road, or Martha Gonzales roses. All are available at area nurseries.