Bird Baths and Hummingbird Feeders

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A number of us who feed the birds in the winter discontinue that feeding for part of the year because of the large amount of food available in the summer and our interest in breaking any dependence that has developed between the feed and rodents. If you miss the action provided by birds at feeders, consider providing water with bird baths. That is where the real need is in a typical San Antonio summer, water for drinking and bathing.

One of the easiest ways to meet the water needs of birds is to decorate your landscape with bird baths. The baths can be very simple and or very decorative. Prices for the simplest birdbaths can be under $40, with the sculpted versions over $100. Make sure whatever you select is functional in that it is shallow, is easy to fill with water, and is easy to rinse. They can be constructed of masonry, metal, or plastic and should be mounted on a 3 foot pedestal.

 Songbirds are not swimmers or divers, for them to take advantage of a bird bath it has to be shallow with firm footing. The depth can vary from .5 to 3 inches deep if the bottom is sloped but is most popular at 1.5 inches if it is a single depth. The shallow depth also means that mosquito breeding is not a problem. The water is splashed and evaporated dry every day.

Put a single or group of bird baths in a relatively open area about 6 feet from shrubs and small trees. The cover should be close enough for the bathing birds to reach if hawks cruise over but not so close that a cat can leap from the cover to the bird bath.

If you refill your bird bath daily you can expect 8-10 species of birds to drink and splash every day. Add a drip feature to provide some moving water and the number of species that will use the bath will increase. During migration periods expect the bird bath with a dripper or recirculating feature to attract warblers, buntings, and orioles in addition to the cardinals, sparrows, doves, starlings, wrens, titmice, chickadees, thrashers, goldfinches, hummingbirds and mockingbirds you may see every day.

Your favorite neighborhood nursery or birding store probably offers the dripping and recirculating mechanisms along with the bird baths. The dripping mechanisms hook up to a hose and can be very inexpensive (under $30). Recirculating systems are more expensive and require you to build some type of reservoir. Check the internet for options if local retailers don’t have what you want.

Along with the bird baths attract birds for observation by providing hummingbird feeders filled with sugar water. Select a feeder with a 1qt glass reservoir and a red plastic tray where the birds can extract the sugar water.

There are some very fancy hummingbird feeders on the market but make sure you obtain one (or more!) that is easy to fill and clean. In my experience the qt. of sugar water lasts about one week. Rinse out the feeder every week when you refill it and use a bottle brush to provide a more thorough cleaning every month.

Mix your sugar water up a gallon per batch by storing it in a milk jug in the refrigerator. Dissolve 1 part sugar in 4 parts water by volume. Red food coloring is used safely by many gardeners in their mix but it is probably not necessary to attract the hummingbirds.

Hang the feeders from the eaves or a trellis on the patio in a location where you can comfortably observe the feeding hummingbirds. Black-chinned hummingbirds breed in the San Antonio area. During the fall migration we often have ruby-throated and rufous hummingbirds that will visit the feeders.