

As I write this (in mid-October), the shrubs and trees in my garden, and those in the neighbourhood and the surrounding countryside, are unusually heavily laden with Rowan berries, hips, haws, sloes and other fruits. This bodes well for fruit-eating birds over the coming season of food scarcity.

Birds and fruit-bearing plants have evolved together in a scenario of mutual benefit. Birds are important dispersers of the seeds of these plants, which pass through their guts unharmed and, in some cases (e.g. Bird Cherry), require the environment of the bird's digestive system to enhance germination. Plants, in return, advertise their seeds by providing colourful, nutritious fruits which provide a valuable energy source relished by many bird species. This co-dependence means that you can enhance the attractiveness of your garden to fruit-eating birds by providing trees and shrubs that offer fruits favoured by birds.



A Blackbird feasting on berries. Black and purple berries are generally preferred by garden birds and are eaten first. (Photo: John Harding, BTO Library)

Whenever possible, choose varieties of plants with overlapping fruiting seasons to maintain the attractiveness of your garden throughout the year. When choosing varieties to plant, bear in mind that birds will select fruit on the basis of energy content, availability and accessibility. There is evidence that birds prefer fruits with high concentrations of anthocyanin (a red or purple pigment). Black and purple berries will normally be taken first, as well as those reflecting in the ultraviolet portion of the spectrum, in which avian vision, unlike ours, is sensitive. Then birds will choose red and orange fruit, followed by yellow and white. Many pale-coloured berries may last through the winter uneaten.

What are the best fruit-bearing plants for attracting birds to your garden?

Hawthorn is a favorite of Blackbirds and is an attractive garden plant both for its flowers and berries. The native species of Hawthorn is the most valuable in this region and can be mixed with other native plants species, such as Elder, Yew, Blackthorn and Spindle, to create a hedge which offers nesting cover and song posts

as well as food. Rowan (*Sorbus*) species are among the most versatile, attracting resident thrushes (Blackbird, Song and Mistle Thrushes) as well as winter visitors (Redwing and Fieldfare). Choose a native variety with red berries as these will be most popular. Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) is also appreciated by thrushes, as well as Blackcap, Collared Dove and other species of birds. Guelder Rose (*Viburnum opulus*) and *Pyracantha* are also sources of nutritious berries and the latter also makes an ideal protected nesting environment due to its thorny structure. Ivy berries are available late into the winter and Holly has a very long fruiting season, from September until the following summer in some cases.

There are many other species that are both attractive garden plants and valuable food sources for birds. If you would like a free leaflet listing these, and providing more information on plants for garden birds, please let me know (see below for contact information). Additional information is also available online at www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/gbw/gardens-wildlife/gardening/plants-fruit-seeds.

Fruit does not necessarily need to be on a plant. Windfall apples are a favourite of all thrush species. You can collect damaged and unattractive fruit and put them out gradually over the winter. It is best to spread them widely as Mistle Thrushes may take to defending a patch against other birds (as they may also do with fruit-laden Holly plants). Song Thrushes are also partial to raisins and sultanas but it is important that these be offered on an elevated bird-table rather than the ground as these fruits are toxic to dogs.

So, keep your eyes peeled for birds exploiting the fruity offerings of your garden, especially resident thrushes and Scandinavian visitors like Fieldfare, Redwing and Waxwing. It looks as if it is going to be a good year for fruit-eating birds in our gardens!

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The author is British Trust for Ornithology Ambassador for the Garden BirdWatch (GBW) scheme in southern Shropshire and is available to speak to local organisations on GBW, as well as answering questions on garden birds and feeding. If you would like free leaflets on garden plants and birds, please contact John on 01694 724170 or at arnfield.2@osu.edu.



Redwings are common winter visitors from Scandinavia to our gardens. They are slightly smaller than a Song Thrush and show a light stripe above the eye and brick-red patches on the sides below the wings. (Photo: John Harding, BTO Library)