

Bring on the Berries — For Birds

By Rachel Oppedahl

The first time I finally saw a cedar waxwing (my favorite bird) in person was moments after it banged into my coworker's office window. We ran outside to see if it was alright, and found it sitting in the dirt looking a little stunned. Later that day it rejoined a crazed cloud of waxwings feasting on a nearby pyracantha bush chock full of brilliant red fall berries. It was a hilarious party to watch, with festive flitting from branch to branch and some waxwings picking, then passing a berry from one bird to another until someone finally gulped it down.



But did the waxwing that crashed into the window become “drunk” on the pyracantha berries? I’ve heard that common wisdom many times. Actually, pyracantha “berries” aren’t berries but pomes (like pears and stone fruit), and they don’t ferment to alcohol. They do contain hydrogen cyanide, a mild neurotoxin, which might make birds a little tipsy if eaten in large quantities.

Whether or not birds get loopy on certain berries, one thing is certain: in fall and winter when insects are not as plentiful, many bird species rely on berry-producing trees, bushes, vines and groundcovers, to either fatten up for migration, or simply to sustain themselves on their home turf. An added bonus is that many of these plants also serve as protective cover and nesting sites; and in spring, their flowers draw pollinators, as well as insects that once again become the staple of birds’ diets. By planting California-native berry producers, gardeners can come even closer to syncing the seasonal food supply to what local wildlife (including migratory birds) has evolved with.

The Habitat Network, a citizen science project in partnership with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and The Nature Conservancy, is a good resource for planning home landscapes in general, and in particular, for selecting berry-producing plants native to various environments. For example, their “Top Five Great Berries for Great Birds in Your Region” page suggests these plants native to California foothill chaparral: big saltbush, blue elderberry, California coffeeberry, red-osier dogwood and toyon. Their top-five picks for Pacific mixed forest (higher elevations) are: oso-berry, red elderberry, red-osier dogwood, salal and Western serviceberry. The webpage tells you when each plant flowers and produces berries, which birds in your region are likely to consume the fruit, and which pollinators might frequent the flowers. Check it out at: <http://content.yardmap.org/learn/great-berries-great-birds/?region=pacific-mixed-forest>.

A longer list of berry-producing plants—some native, some not—to consider for foothill gardens includes: crabapples, mulberries, white oak, junipers, winterberry (holly), currants, viburnum—and of course, manzanita.

To keep birds in berries through fall and winter, choose a variety of plants that come into fruit at different times during these seasons. Some trees, like red-osier dogwood, are adorned with berries only in autumn, while crabapples, Virginia creeper and holly produce “winter-persistent berries,” which can decorate the plant until early spring.

The good news, bad news about the berry-producing plants listed above is: many of the berries are edible for humans (currants, mulberries) but some are toxic to pets and/or people. So, research before you plant.

As for my beloved cedar waxwings, they are said to enjoy the berries of the California toyon, native to the Sierra foothills, so I’m planting one this fall. As far as I can tell, toyon berries don’t give birds a buzz, but I’ll plant it well away from the house, just to be safe. No dizzy birds bouncing off my windows, please.

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