



Kelly Feehan

Extension Educator – Community Environment

2715 13th Street, Columbus, NE 68601

[402-563-4901](tel:402-563-4901)

environment.unl.edu

water.unl.edu/stormwater

platte.unl.edu

Twitter: @KellyFeehan2

Plants to Attract Songbirds and Caterpillars

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator

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Attracting songbirds is usually done by having bird feeders and waterers. Landscape plants also play a role in attracting songbirds, especially those that produce berries and some that caterpillars like.

We know berry and other seed producing plants attract birds. A few good landscape plants for berries include redosier and gray dogwood, red chokeberry, serviceberry, crabapples, hawthorn, cherry and plum. There are many others.

Keep in mind not all plants are good for birds. Popular plants considered to provide poor nutrition for birds, and best avoided for this use, are bush honeysuckle, ornamental or callery pear, burning bush, and privet.

Plants not usually considered for attracting birds are plants on which insects lay eggs. Those that hatch into caterpillars are especially helpful since songbirds mostly feed their young insects.

When we see a caterpillar on a leaf, the first instinct might be to pull it off and stomp on it or apply an insecticide to kill it. This thinking needs to change and is beginning to.

For example, milkweed is being planted to help Monarch butterflies. Milkweed is planted as food for caterpillars as this is the only food they eat. The adult butterfly will gather nectar from a variety of flowers.

While plant leaves may end up having some holes from caterpillars, most feeding on trees and shrubs is harmless. With the large number of leaves present, plants retain enough leaves for photosynthesis.

Whenever an insect is noticed on a plant, it is important to identify what the insect is and if it is even harmful. And to remember most caterpillars will eventually be butterflies or moths.

In many cases, control is not needed or justified on trees and shrubs nor on perennial flowers. The insects are simply part of a healthy ecosystem that supports many other living things like songbirds.

Trees known to support a diversity of caterpillars include oaks, willow, cherry, black cherry, plum, river birch and hawthorn.

In research, oaks were found to support more than 550 species of butterfly and moth caterpillars. Oak blossoms are also known to benefit pollinators like native bees.

Unfortunately, oaks are under planted in Nebraska communities. Pin oak was overplanted and gave oaks a bad name because of iron chlorosis where the leaves turn yellow.

While pin oak is not recommended for Nebraska, some great oaks to consider are red, scarlet, black, bur, and white oaks. And there's many more, like shingle, dwarf chinkapin, shumard and chestnut oaks.

For an even longer list of oaks to plant in Nebraska, search Oaks for Nebraska on the internet and look for the list provided by the Nebraska Forest Service.

And for additional lists of landscape plants for wildlife in Nebraska, go to <https://go.unl.edu/35c4>

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If you'd like to grow vegetables this summer but don't have a garden space, a number of vegetables can be grown in containers. The size of the container is important for success. Small containers in the 1 to 3 gallon range work best for salad crops or single plants of broccoli, cauliflower and cabbage. Use three to 10 gallon pots to grow medium size vegetables like green beans, onions and summer squash. Containers larger than 10 gallons will support tomatoes, peppers, and some of the vine crops, like cucumbers and melons. Containers need to have drainage holes and a good commercial potting mix should be used. Do not add soil from a garden area as regular soils can be poorly drained, heavy and become compacted in the container. When growing vegetables in containers, close attention must be paid to watering and fertilization. Containers dry out much quicker than garden beds and often require additional nitrogen.

Every now and then I am asked if an apple, peach or other fruit tree can be grown from seed saved from the fruit. The question is usually asked because the person likes the flavor of the fruit so much, they want to grow it themselves. While you can, of course, grow a new tree from seed, the tree is not likely to bear fruit that tastes the same as the fruit the seed was taken from; hence, the purpose is defeated. Rarely is the fruit from a tree grown from saved seed identical to the parent plant. For example, about 1 in every 80,000 apple trees grown from seed will be as good as the apples the seed was removed from. More often, apple trees grown from seed have small, inferior quality fruit. If you really like the flavor of a specific fruit, first you need to know if the cultivar is hardy to the area. You can then either purchase that cultivar or vegetatively propagate it by grafting scion wood from the parent tree onto a suitable root stock.

Attracting songbirds to backyards is usually done by having bird feeders and waterers; however, plants play a major role in attracting songbirds. We know plants that produce berries will attract birds. A few good plants for berries are dogwood, chokeberry, serviceberry, crabapples, hawthorn, cherry and plum. What we might not think about are plants that caterpillars love. The idea of planting trees that attract caterpillars may make one wonder if that's wise; but songbirds feed their babies caterpillars; and some trees, unbeknownst to us, always have high populations of caterpillars. They're harmless because the minor feeding they do goes unnoticed by the tree and people. Trees known to support caterpillars that help songbirds include oaks, willow, cherry and plum. Popular plants that provide poor nutrition for birds, and are best avoided for this use, are bush honeysuckle, ornamental pear, burning bush, and privet.

Planning to put in a new garden or landscape bed this spring? Consider making the bed a rain garden. To the average person, most rain gardens look like any flower garden. What makes them a rain garden is they are designed and located where they will collect rainwater, typically from a roof downspout. Rain gardens help conserve treated drinking water since the garden makes better use of rainfall. Instead of rainwater from roofs being directed into the street and storm drains, it flows into the garden and soaks into the soil. Rain gardens are shallow depressions with low berms on three sides to prevent rainwater flowing out and located where soil is well drained. Rain gardens only hold water for about 24 hours after rainfall. Many perennials, ornamental grasses and even shrubs are planted in rain gardens. To learn more about rain garden, go to UNL publications and type rain gardens in the search box; or give me a call.

For fruit trees, annual pruning is needed to encourage production of fruiting wood; and to keep fruit trees more open to sunlight penetration which increases production and quality. Fruit trees are best pruned when dormant, but wait until March or early April. Fruit trees pruned too early in winter may be damaged by cold temperatures. The reasons to prune during late winter or early spring, just before active growth begins, is pruning wounds seal quickly once growth starts; what needs to be pruned is easier to see without leaves on the tree; and bark is less likely to tear when cuts are made in late winter. Some people are concerned that late winter/early spring pruning will cause trees to bleed sap and be harmed; but this is a myth. It does not harm trees if sap is beginning to flow at the time of pruning. Make proper pruning cuts, use sharp pruning tools; and do not use pruning paints or wound dressings on pruning wounds.