

LANDSCAPING FOR HUMMINGBIRDS

By Ed Dillingham



[Chuck Otte](#), Agriculture and Natural Resources Agent for Geary County, provided an interesting and entertaining presentation on making your yard more attractive to hummingbirds at the Master Gardener's March 7, 2017 meeting.

Some hummingbirds facts: Hummingbirds are unique to the western hemisphere. There are over 300 species. In the middle and eastern United States, including Kansas, 99.9% of the hummingbirds will be the ruby-throated hummingbird. They typically live 5-6 years in the wild. They are the only bird that can hover in place. The hummingbird migration season in Kansas starts northbound from Central America in April with the males leading the way and peaks in June or July with nesting and brooding. Then the males start returning southbound in late July with the females and young starting to migrate southward in August through September. Most of the migration is complete by the first hard frost. However, hummingbirds have been documented to be in Kansas every month except March. But the likelihood of a hummingbird surviving Kansas' cold weather with essentially no flowers and no insects for nutrition is very low. Migration is based upon the length of the day not on food availability. Limited research indicates that the same hummingbird returns to the same area and maybe the same feeder each year. So go ahead and give your birds names. Hummingbirds are solitary birds and do not form flocks, even during migration. And they do not hitch rides on the backs of other birds during migration.

Hummingbirds need water, food and cover. They are high energy, carnivorous birds. The heartbeat of the hummingbird goes from 200 beats per minute during flight down to 30 beats per minute during rest. Therefore, they need high energy foods, such as nectar from flowers or sugar water from hummingbird feeders as well as insects for protein to build and maintain strong muscles. They need cover for shelter from the weather and predators, safe resting and roosting areas, and nesting and brood raising areas. For shelter, hummingbirds like redbud and sycamore trees. Redbud trees provide overhead shelter and resting places close to feeding sites; sycamore trees provide height for nesting, and both redbud and sycamore trees provide an abundance of insects for their high protein diet. In Kansas, nesting is generally limited to the eastern half of the state.

To attract hummingbirds to your yard, you need a good selection and group placement of plants and feeders. The more feeders, the more hummingbirds you will attract. Hummingbirds are territorial (especially the males) but even the females will tolerate their own young for only so long before the young are also considered rivals at a food source. Hummingbird flowers such as traditional red salvia, agastache, trumpet creeper (very invasive), scarlet runner bean, cardinal flower, cannas and the old fashioned hollyhocks are all good nectar sources. Adding sugar water feeders to these natural food sources assures a continuous supply of high energy food for the hummingbirds.

Hummingbirds are attracted to the color red. However, research has shown using red food coloring in the sugar water may be detrimental to hummingbirds. Neither should commercial mixes using red dye, honey (which may contain bacteria) nor artificial sugars be used. The birds need the high calorie content of regular sugar. Just the slightest red on a feeder will attract hummingbirds (but remove any yellow since yellow attracts bees). A four parts water to one part sugar mix makes a good solution for your feeder. And you don't need to boil the water since the sugar will readily dissolve in the water, and putting a boiled, sterilized solution in an unsterilized feeder does nothing to increase the time the solution stays good, i.e. not cloudy. The solution should be changed out every 2 – 3 days, depending on temperature highs which spoil the solution. (Listen to Chuck Otte's years of experience rather than the "purists" pleadings of daily change out.) To avoid wasting a lot of sugar water, you may want to only partially fill the feeders during the early incoming migration months of April and May and late outgoing migration of October. One cup (8 ounces) of solution will supply the daily needs of 40 to 60 hummingbirds. Feeders should be put out around April 15 and remain until late November (or when ice). Hummingbirds also love grape jelly and there are feeders specifically designed to screw onto jars of grape jelly. But be aware that bees, ants and Baltimore Orioles also like hummingbird feeders with sugar water and grape jelly. So how do you know when you have enough feeders? Chuck says, "When you're going broke buying sugar."

Other sources of information are the book "Hummingbirds of North America" Peterson Field Guide Series, Sheri Williamson and internet sites, including www.hummingbirds.net.