

Bring on the Hummers: How to Attract and Care for Hummingbirds in Middle Tennessee

As the warmth of Spring settles over Middle Tennessee, many of us start seeing a familiar flash of color flitting between flowers, the ruby-throated hummingbird, one of nature's most fascinating and hardworking creatures. These tiny birds are not only beautiful but also serve an important ecological role as pollinators, helping to fertilize plants as they sip nectar. Every year, these little gems of the avian world embark on a remarkable journey, migrating thousands of miles from their wintering grounds in Central America to their summer breeding grounds in the eastern United States. For those of us in Tennessee, this means the arrival of these energetic travelers, who seek out food, shelter, and nesting spots in our gardens. Known for their incredible agility, rapid wing beats, and striking iridescent feathers, hummingbirds are both a joy to watch and a symbol of the season's blooming beauty.



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The ruby-throated hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*) is the only species of hummingbird that breeds in the eastern United States, including Tennessee. Despite its delicate size, just three inches long and weighing less than a nickel, it performs one of the most remarkable migrations in the bird world. Each spring, these birds fly north from Central America, often making a non-stop 500-mile flight across the Gulf of Mexico. Males usually arrive first to establish feeding territories, followed by females who begin building tiny, camouflaged nests out of spider silk, plant down, and lichen. The males are known for their shimmering ruby-red throat patch, while females have a more subdued white and green plumage. These birds beat their wings up to 80 times per second and can visit hundreds of flowers a day, making them important pollinators as well as captivating visitors to any garden. If you'd like to roll out the welcome mat for these fascinating fliers, now's the perfect time. Here's how you can make your outdoor space a hummingbird haven.

One of the easiest and most effective ways to attract hummingbirds is by offering nectar in a feeder. While many commercial products are available, the healthiest option is a homemade nectar made by mixing one-part white granulated sugar with four parts warm water. Stir the mixture until the sugar dissolves completely, then let it cool before filling your feeder. It's important to avoid using honey, brown sugar, or artificial sweeteners, as these can be harmful to the birds. Red dye is also unnecessary and potentially dangerous. Hummingbirds are attracted to

the red color of the feeder itself, not the liquid inside. As the weather warms, nectar can spoil quickly. During hot spells, you should change the nectar every two to three days to prevent fermentation and mold, which can make birds sick. Clean your feeder regularly using hot water and a bottle brush. Soap is not recommended, as it can leave a residue. If you notice mold, a diluted vinegar rinse can help clean it safely. Make sure the feeder is thoroughly rinsed before refilling.

While feeders are a quick way to draw hummingbirds, flowering plants offer natural nectar and add beauty and biodiversity to your landscape. Hummingbirds are especially drawn to tubular-shaped, brightly colored flowers, particularly those in shades of red, orange, and pink. Some excellent choices for Middle Tennessee gardens include trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*), a vigorous native climber with large orange-red blooms; bee balm (*Monarda*), which produces bright, shaggy flowers in red, pink, and purple hues; and coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*), a native vine that's a favorite of hummingbirds and far less invasive than its Japanese cousin. The cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) is another favorite, thriving in moist soils and producing vivid red spikes of blossoms in mid to late summer. Other reliable hummingbird attractors include salvia varieties (many of which are drought-tolerant), native columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), and annuals like zinnias and petunias, which are easy to grow and provide consistent color throughout the season. Whenever possible, opt for native plants, they are better suited to local conditions and offer greater ecological benefits for pollinators and birds alike.

Beyond food sources, hummingbirds need a safe and supportive environment. These birds expend a tremendous amount of energy and need places to perch, rest, and bath. Thin branches, plant supports, or even garden wires can serve as perches where hummingbirds can rest between feedings. They also enjoy bathing and preening, so a misting fountain, drip emitter, or shallow birdbath with a gentle spray can help attract them. Avoid using pesticides in your garden, especially during the nesting season. Hummingbirds rely not only on nectar but also on small insects and spiders to supply the protein they need to raise their young. Reducing chemical use supports a healthier habitat overall. Finally, consider planting a layered garden with a mix of trees, shrubs, and flowering plants. Dense vegetation provides protection from predators and can even serve as nesting areas.

Hummingbirds are more than just backyard entertainment, they are vital pollinators, remarkable long-distance travelers, and fascinating creatures to observe. Their presence is a reminder of the intricate connections that sustain our ecosystems and the natural beauty we can support right outside our door. By creating a welcoming environment with native plants, feeders, and water sources, you can offer these incredible birds not just a stopover, but a thriving habitat. These dazzling creatures will repay your efforts with hours of

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enjoyment as they flit from bloom to bloom, and their work as pollinators will benefit your entire garden. So, this spring, take a moment to set up a feeder, plant a few vibrant flowers, and let the hummingbirds grace your space. With a little effort, you can help ensure that these tiny marvels continue to thrive and bring joy to your garden for seasons to come.

For questions or comments, please feel free to reach me at the UT/TSU Rutherford County Extension office. Our main office line is 615-898-7710 and my email is jski@utk.edu. Additionally, please check us out on the web at rutherford.tennessee.edu to learn more about upcoming classes and all other Extension programming activities that we offer.

Happy Gardening!

(Ruby-throated hummingbird feeding on Columbine, photo J. Stefanski)

