



CROW WING COUNTY MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

Ask the Master Gardener

FEBRUARY 2017 COLUMN

Dear Master Gardener:

I'm worried about the backyard birds getting enough to eat in the winter. Do you have any suggestions for attracting and feeding the winter birds?

If you are an old hand at feeding our winter visitors, or a newbie, these tips from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources will guide you in feeder/feed placement and selection.

There are three main choices in food: large seeds, small seeds and suet.

Large seeds include black-oil sunflower, striped sunflower, safflower, peanuts, shelled corn, ear corn and cardinal mixes that contain sunflower, safflower and peanuts. Northern cardinals, blue jays, black-capped and chestnut-backed chickadees, house and purple finches, American goldfinches, evening and pine grosbeaks, gray and Steller's jays, nuthatches, crossbills, and titmice all love sunflower seeds. Peanuts provide a nutritious diet for birds, including black-capped chickadees, nuthatches, woodpeckers, and blue jays. Even northern cardinals will come to a peanut feeder. However, these feeds also attract mammals including squirrels and raccoons. Safflower seeds are not as attractive to these eating machines. Cracked corn and milo are attractive to house sparrows and starlings, which will discourage other birds from visiting your feeders, and are not recommended.

Small seeds include millet and Niger thistle. Millet sprinkled on the ground or in tray feeders will attract dark-eyed juncos, mourning doves, and American tree, fox, Harris', white-throated, white-crowned and golden-crowned sparrows. Niger thistle will bring American and lesser goldfinches, common and hoary redpolls, house and purple finches, and pine siskins.

Many wintering birds also benefit from suet, suet mixes and peanut butter, including pileated, red bellied, red headed, downy and hairy woodpeckers; chickadees, titmice, and nuthatches.

Water is critical to overwintering birds. Including a heated birdbath in your feeder set-up will be an open invitation to a variety of birds. Don't worry about birds freezing if they bathe on a cold winter day. This water is primarily for drinking.

Include a variety of feeders: open or covered platform feeders, suet feeders, and cylindrical feeders will be attractive to a broad variety of birds. The best feeder sites are downwind from the shelter provided by conifers, ornamental grass plantings, cattail marshes or buildings. To avoid giving raptors or cats an advantage in catching birds, feeders should be at least ten feet from the nearest cover where such predators could hide.

Make sure you have a pair of binoculars and a good bird identification guide close to your viewing window, sit back and enjoy the show.

For more information about feeding the birds throughout the season, visit www.dnr.state.mn.us/birdfeeding/index.html, or check out Wild about Birds: The DNR Bird Feeding Guide by Carroll Henderson.

Dear Master Gardener:

I received a Norfolk Island pine at Christmastime and was wondering how to take care of it. Also, if it's a pine tree how big will it get?

A Norfolk Island pine, which is actually not a pine tree, is a wonderful houseplant which can last many years with the right care. It can grow to 200 feet in height in its native habitat on Norfolk Island in the South Pacific near Australia. As a houseplant it will reach a height of five to eight feet. Place your Norfolk Island pine in a bright, sunny location, making sure to turn it every so often so that it doesn't lean or grow towards the window and light. The plant performs best when nighttime temperatures are about 10° F. cooler than the daytime temperatures. These plants do not do well when exposed to extreme temperatures. Like most houseplants, humidity is important, and the Norfolk Island pine likes it more humid than most houseplants at about 50% humidity. Fertilize your plant when it begins to put on new growth, usually between March and September, although it will tolerate very little fertilizer. If the soil is kept too wet or light conditions are too low, the lower limbs may drop off. In general, Norfolk Island pines are a fairly pest-free, easy houseplant.

Dear Master Gardener:

We would like to plant some apple trees in the spring. Are Honeycrisp apple trees hardy in the Brainerd Lakes area?

The Honeycrisp apple is one of the University of Minnesota's best apples. In 2006 it was named the Minnesota State Fruit. Unfortunately they are not reliably hardy here. According to the latest information from the University of Minnesota Extension, the Honeycrisp apple tree is hardy to USDA Zone 4 (-25 to -30 degrees Fahrenheit). The following edible crabapple and apple trees are hardy to USDA Zone 3b, which is the hardiness zone for the Brainerd Lakes area: 'Centennial' and 'Chestnut' crabapple, 'Frostbite', 'Zestar', 'Sweet Sixteen', 'State Fair', 'Haralson', and 'Red Baron' apple trees. Plant at least two cultivars, since each cultivar needs pollen from a different cultivar for fruit set.

Dear Master Gardener:

Are Juneberries an edible fruit we can grow here?

The Juneberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) is native to North America. Eight of the U.S. species are native to Minnesota, and three of these species (Saskatoon, downy, and smooth) are ancestors to the cultivars that are grown in Minnesota gardens and landscapes for their displays of spring flowers and fruit, their beautiful fall color, and their edible fruit. Yes, the dark purple ripe fruit is edible and has a flavor like that of dark cherries or raisins and is usually milder than blueberries. According to Cornell University, a typical Juneberry is 18% sugar, and about 80% water. They have a lower moisture content than blueberries, so they have relatively higher amounts of calcium, natural fiber, proteins, carbohydrates and lipids in them. Juneberries are an excellent source of iron – each serving provides about 23% RDA for iron (almost twice as much as blueberries). They contain high levels of phenolic compounds, particularly anthocyanins, and they provide healthy amounts of potassium, magnesium and phosphorous. Juneberries have about as much vitamin C, thiamin, riboflavin, pantothenic acid, vitamin B-6, folate, vitamin A and vitamin E as blueberries, and also trace amounts of biotin.

These are some of the cultivars hardy in our area and recommended by the University of Minnesota Extension for their fruit: Honeywood, Northline, Pembina, Regent, Smokey, and Theissen.

February Garden Tips

- Keep Valentine's Day flowers attractive as long as possible by setting them in a cool location when you are not around to enjoy them. Put them in a spotlessly clean vase in tepid water with floral preservative. Add more water and preservative as the level drops, replacing it, as it turns cloudy. Trim off any foliage that sits below the water as it rots easily, and make a fresh cut at the base of each stem whenever you change the water.
- The ideal time to have shade trees pruned is late in the dormant season- the latter part of this month through the end of March. No pruning paint will be needed, nor will disease organisms spread.
- By mid to late February, days are noticeably longer, and many houseplants react by growing more actively. Provide the nutrients they need to support that additional growth by fertilizing at half-strength, every 3-4 weeks. In addition, keep windows cleaned for maximum light.
- Cut slender branches of pussy willow, forsythia, Nanking cherry, or red maple late this month or early next, to force into bloom indoors. Re-cut the stems and soak them in a warm (not hot) water bath overnight, then in a bucket of warm water in a 60 to 65° F. location with indirect light. Move them to brighter light as flower buds open.
- Exercise your green thumb by propagating pothos, ivies, heartleaf philodendrons and other houseplants. Fill an oblong plastic bag with fresh vermiculite, add water and seal the opening. Make small slits to poke the cuttings into; then move the 'pillow pack' to a bright location. When all cuttings root, open the bag and transplant them into containers of fresh potting soil.
- The warm, dry conditions common in Minnesota homes in winter create a perfect environment for spider mites. Check houseplants regularly for fine webbing or discoloration.

University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardeners are trained and certified volunteers for the University of Minnesota Extension Service. All information given in this column is based on university research. To ask a question, call the Master Gardener Help Line at 218-454-GROW (4769) and leave a recorded message. A Master Gardener will return your call.

