



Attracting Eastern Bluebirds to Your Garden

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The Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) is one of our most beautiful native birds. Not long ago, the loss of habitat, use of pesticides, and introduction of the English House Sparrow to North America decimated the bluebird population. The North American Bluebird Society or NABS (nabluebirdsociety.org) was created to promote the education, conservation and research of bluebirds and other native cavity nesting birds. Currently, the bluebird population is stable, but continues to need our help. Please visit the NABS website for complete information about bluebirds. Additionally, the Maryland Bluebird Society website (mdbluebirdsociety.org) and a book entitled The Bluebird Monitor's Guide by Cynthia Berger, et al, are excellent resources.

Here are a few points to ponder before you begin attracting bluebirds to your garden:

Habitat: Bluebirds prefer open spaces for hunting such as meadows, parks and fields. They nest in cavities such as dead trees, wooden fencerows and nest boxes provided by bluebird lovers. If your yard is not an open space, but you live near one, bluebirds may still decide to call your yard home.

Food: Insects are the primary food for bluebirds. Please use pesticides cautiously! Many birds are harmed or killed by ingesting poisoned insects. When insects are scarce (such as in winter), bluebirds survive by eating a variety of berries found in the landscape. There are many plants native to our region that will provide seasonal fruit year round. Native plants occur naturally in a location, and have evolved to survive in that climate. Wildlife depends on many regional plants for food and shelter, so consider native species when planning your backyard landscape. Bluebirds are particularly fond of berries from the Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus florida*). Other native plants with fruits at various times of year are American Holly (*Ilex opaca*) and the Eastern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*). For more information about native plants, log onto the Maryland Native Plant Society website (mdflora.org). Bluebirds also love mealworms, which are not worms at all, but the larva of the darkling beetle. "Mealies" may be purchased online, at nature stores, or raised at home. Suet mixes are beneficial in winter when many other food sources are depleted.

Water: A birdbath or other water source is vital. Use a heating element for birdbaths in winter to keep water from freezing. Replacing water daily helps prevent mosquitoes from breeding during warmer months.

Nest boxes: Providing nest boxes is an easy way to encourage bluebirds to come to your yard. February is not too early for bluebirds to start looking for places to nest in the spring. **If you put up a nest box, you must monitor it! If you are not willing to monitor the nest box, do not put one up.** There is nothing worse than inviting bluebirds to move in, and then allowing them to be killed by predators such as the non-native House Sparrow or the cat next door. House Sparrows are aggressive cavity nesters and will destroy any birds, nestlings or eggs in a nest box they have taken over. Since they are non-native, it is legal to remove their nests, eggs, and the birds themselves from your nest boxes. Be sure to positively identify non-native species before removing.

Other Cavity Nesters: There are native cavity-nesters that may occupy your nest box. The Tree Swallows, House Wrens and Black Capped Chickadees are common. It is illegal to remove native birds from your bluebird boxes.

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, 301- 600-1596, or visit <http://www.frederick.umd.edu/>. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.

