Hummingbirds Add Grace to the Garden

In a few weeks they will return, flashes of emerald winging their way through our gardens. Adding grace notes to the beauty of our flowers, the hummingbirds will be back.

Around April 15 each year, hummingbirds return from their winter digs. Weighing the same as a dime, they pack plenty of power in a small package. Their wings beat 90 times a second and their aerial acrobatics are second to none.

Our local hummingbird is the ruby-throated hummingbird. The males sport a jaunty red handkerchief of feathers they flash to attract females and warn off male aggressors. Hey, baby. Whoa, bud.

Hummingbirds are valuable pollinators. As they dip their bills into flowers, they pick up pollen on their feathers which they transfer to other flowers. Bees and butterflies get all the press, but hummingbirds help.

Hummingbirds’ powerhouse metabolism needs constant fuel. One hummingbird needs the nectar from about 1,000 blossoms a day to survive. As gardeners, there is much we can do to help these flying jewels.

To attract hummingbirds to your garden, plan blooms from April to October to provide a steady source of nectar. They supplement their diet with tiny insects and spiders, but it’s nectar they need most.

A perfect addition to your garden is the native columbine, *Aquilegia canadensis*. It blooms in concert with the hummingbirds’ arrival in mid-April when few flowers are
blooming. Plus, it has the tubular form that’s custom-made for a hummingbird’s long, slender beak.

The rumors are true: hummingbirds favor red and orange flowers. So add some to your garden plantings. If it’s red or orange and has a tubular shape, your hummingbirds will be ecstatic. Think coral honeysuckle, salvia and bee balm.

Some plants fool you by having a hidden tubular base that hummingbirds favor. Look at a hibiscus, petunia, morning glory, lantana or phlox to see what I mean.

Nectar-heavy flowers without tubular shapes score big with hummingbirds, too. Lupines and hollyhocks, foxglove and nasturtium, rose of Sharon and mimosa are all favorites.

Plants provide wonderful, natural food sources for hummingbirds, but many people – myself included – like to put up hummingbird feeders. The best feeders are sturdy, easy to clean and hang, and have multiple ports and perches.

Skip the pre-made hummingbird food mixes and make your own. Simply dissolve 1 part sugar in 4 parts water. I boil a cup of water and add a ¼ cup sugar. No need to add red dye which can be harmful. Clean and refill your feeders at least once a week.

Hummingbirds prefer showers to baths, so you can make them oh-so-happy by adding a water dripper or mister to your garden. They will delight you by dancing in the spray.

If you’d like to help your hummingbirds even more, avoid using chemicals in your garden. Their fast metabolism and tiny size make them especially vulnerable to insecticides and herbicides. So, go green.

I hope you will welcome hummingbirds into your garden this year. There are few sights more joyful, few birds more charming.

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