

Gardening Basics

Hummingbird Feeder Plants



Courtesy Norman G. Flagg, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

When hummingbirds arrive after their Spring migration, those delightful, feisty beauties are hungry! To keep up the energy required to go from 0 to 60 mph in 3 feet takes lots of calories. A 170-pound man would have to burn 155,000 calories to equal what a hummingbird burns in a day. Hummers must eat every 10 to 15 minutes during the day and then go into a hibernation-like state at night (torpor). Commonly seen in Denton County, ruby-throated hummingbirds migrate over vast distances to and from Mexico, flying nonstop across the Gulf after they “bulk up” for the flight. Sugar from nectar is their main food, but they also eat small spiders and insects caught in flight for protein.

Hummingbirds are important pollinators for tube-shaped flowers since pollen gets stuck to their heads when they dip deeply into a flower. Feeders should be considered supplemental food, at most – and please don’t add any colored dye to the food. It is detrimental to the birds. Water and sugar are all they need in a 4 or 5-to-1 ratio – 4 or 5 cups of boiled water to 1 cup of white sugar, mix it up, cool, and serve. Never use honey or sugar substitutes with/instead of regular sugar – they cause bacterial and fungal threats to the birds. Clean feeders every 2-3 days and filled to keep hummers coming back.

Flowering plants that provide nectar for hummingbirds

Natural nectar is preferred by hummingbirds so add some of their favorite plants with long tubular flowers to your garden. Hummers use their beaks and long tongues (straw-like tubes) to reach the nectar.

Esperanza or Yellow Bells (*Tecoma stans*) is a native and a Texas SuperStar® plant. Denton County is positioned at its northernmost zone for cold hardiness. Take a little extra care protecting this beauty from cold temperatures. It can be grown in a large container that can be moved into a shelter during cold weather. They are fast-growing with bright yellow 2.5-inch flowers and shiny leaves. Esperanza grows 3 to 6 feet tall and 3 to 4 feet wide. The plant tolerates heat and will bloom from Spring through Fall. It is deciduous and may develop long, woody seed pods in the Fall. Periodic pruning will help it maintain a nice structure. It can be grown in full or partial sun and has a fire-wise rating of 10, the highest fire-resistant rating. Esperanza is happy in any soil if it is well drained.

Propagate Esperanza by cuttings or seeds

Flame Acanthus (*Anisacanthus quadrifidus var. wrightii*) is a drought-tolerant, heat-loving, native, perennial shrub that gets no more than 5 feet by 4 feet with red or orange blooms. It is perfect for hummers – so much so it is often called Hummingbird Bush. Another plus for gardeners is its bloom time – midsummer to frost. In very cold temperatures, Flame Acanthus can die back to its roots but will reemerge in spring from the ground. It is late to leaf out in spring, so be patient, and can be pruned or



Courtesy Joseph A. Marcus, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

even severely cut back in the early spring before leaf-out. Flame acanthus adapts well to sunny, well-drained sites and is a good choice for landscape areas with poor soil and reflected heat sources, like sidewalks and driveways. Supplemental water encourages flowering in the hottest times. The leaves are small and thin, allowing the blooms to really show off. It works well as a border plant or informal hedge and as a specimen plant. Even without its leaves and blooms, the pale bark can add interest to the garden if placed in front of a dark background.



Courtesy Stephanie Brundage, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

Mealy Blue Sage (*Salvia farinacea*) is a hardy, native perennial that is highly drought and heat tolerant. It will bloom in partial shade to full sun but avoid planting it in wet areas. It prefers sandy or gravelly soil but will adapt if the soil is very well drained. It has a mounding tendency and violet to blue to white tubular flowers on six to eight-inch flower spikes. Mealy Blue Sage has aromatic, gray-green leaves that smell nice to people, but deer don't care for it. 'Victoria Blue' is the native selection, while 'Henry Duelberg' is becoming a popular variety in many nurseries. It grows to 1 1/2 ft. wide by 2 ft. high and does well in containers or in the ground where massing in groups is impressive. It is good for rock gardens, meadows, and flower beds. Propagate by seeds or soft cuttings. Pruning after the initial flowering will prevent leggy plants and bring on more blooms. Consider Henry's wife 'Augusta Duelberg', a charming white salvia that complements Henry quite well. Explore other members of the *Salvia* family.

All honeysuckles attract hummingbirds, including **Coral Honeysuckle** (*Lonicera sempervirens*).

More contained than the notoriously invasive Japanese honeysuckle, the east Texas native blooms intermittently along a fence or trellis for most of the year. Its bright red trumpet-shaped flowers are very attractive to hummingbirds...and to deer. Coral honeysuckle thrives in sun to partial shade and in soil that drains well. It demands little water and grows to 6 feet x 15 feet.



Courtesy Sally & Andy Wasowski, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

White Bush Honeysuckle (*Lonicera albiflora*), a native of the Hill Country and North Texas, is non-aggressive and usually grows as a 4 feet tall deciduous bush with white flowers and vining branches that can reach up to 10 feet. The white flowers are followed in the Fall by orange-red berries which attract birds. Plant this honeysuckle in partial sun, where it can climb walls, columns, trellises, and fences. It has high heat tolerance, low water requirements, and adapts to many types of soil. Propagate by soft or semi-hardwood cuttings taken in late Summer to Fall. Seeds collected from ripe berries need to be cleaned immediately and must be stratified for 2–3 months.



"Female Broad-tailed Hummingbird Feeding on Agastache Rupestris" by USFWS Mountain Prairie is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Threadleaf Giant Hyssop (*Agastache rupestris*), often called Hummingbird Mint, is a xeriscape perennial that hummingbirds love. It is cold hardy for our area and heat and drought-tolerant, in addition to being deer and rabbit-resistant. In the Mint family, it's a good self-seeder and will naturalize. Like many drought-tolerant plants, Threadleaf Giant Hyssop has gray-green foliage. Sometimes labeled as Sunset Hyssop, the unusual, fragrant orange or pink flowers have lavender calyxes and appear from late Spring through to Fall. Cut it back in late Summer to encourage the Fall rebloom. It grows 36" to 42" high and 18" wide in full sun to partial shade, with very little water. If you plant it in a container, be sure to give it excellent drainage as it does not like wet feet. Re-pot every two to three years.

There are many other plants with tube-like flowers that attract hummingbirds, including Turk's cap (*Malvaviscus drummondii*), which thrives in sun or shade, Scarlet Beebalm (*Monarda didyma*), Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), Standing Cypress (*Ipomopsis rubra*), 'John Fanick' or 'Victoria' Phlox (*Phlox paniculata*), Desert Willow (*Chilopsis linearis*), Penstemons, and the winter/early spring annual Snapdragons which are great for those early arriving hummers.

Resources

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