

Gardening Basics

Hummingbird Feeder Plants

Hummingbirds are here and 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 a day to equal what a hummingbird burns in a day! Hummers must eat every 10 to 15 minutes during the day and then go into hibernation at night. Commonly seen in Denton County, ruby-throated hummingbirds, among others, migrate over vast distances to and from Mexico, flying nonstop across the Gulf of Mexico after they “bulk up” for the flight. Sugar from nectar is their main food source, 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 to feed. Hummingbirds are unique fliers with the ability to fly up, down, backward, and hover in place. The feeders we put out should be considered supplemental food at most – and please don’t add any colored dye to the food. It is detrimental to the hummers! 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 sugar, mix it up, cool, and serve to your guests. Never substitute honey or sugar substitutes for regular sugar – they cause bacterial and fungal threats to the birds.

Flowering plants that provide nectar for hummingbirds

Natural nectar is preferred by hummingbirds. So, if you want to provide a steady supply of nectar for these high-energy delights, then add some of their favorite plants to your garden. Hummers prefer long, tubular flowers they can stick their beaks and long tongues (which have straw-like tubes) into to suck the nectar out. Here are a few easily found options to ponder.

Esperanza or Yellow Bells (*Tecoma stans*) is a native Texas Super Star 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 green foliage.

Esperanza grows 3 to 6 feet tall and 3 to 4 feet wide. The plant tolerates summer heat and will bloom from spring through fall. It is deciduous and sometimes develops 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.



Gold Star Esperanza, Courtesy Texas Superstar Plants



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

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’ beaks and tongues – 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 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. Flame acanthus works well as a border plant or informal hedge and as a specimen plant. It has pale bark, so even without its leaves and blooms it can add interest to your garden if placed in front of a dark background.

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 Mealy Blue Sage in wet areas. Care must be taken with transplants – it does not transplant well from the wild. 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 name for Mealy Blue Sage in many nurseries. It grows to 1.5 feet wide by 2 feet high and does well in containers or in the ground where massing Mealy Blue Sage in groups is impressive. It is good for rock gardens, meadows, and flower beds. Propagate by seeds or soft cuttings. Occasional pruning after the initial flowering will prevent leggy plants and bring on more blooms. Consider Henry's "wife" 'Augusta Duelberg' and Mealy Blue Sage also. She's a charming white salvia that complements Henry quite well!



Mealy Blue Sage, Courtesy Gore, Barry G., Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center

All honeysuckles attract hummingbirds, including coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera*

sempervirens). More contained than the notoriously invasive Japanese honeysuckle, the east Texas native blooms along a fence or trellis off and on for most of the year. It's 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.



Coral Honeysuckle, Courtesy Wasowski, Sally and Andy, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center

Coral honeysuckle is evergreen throughout most of Texas, with shiny dark green leaves and white undersides. The flower clusters appear throughout the growing seasons, and it blooms sporadically during the winter. Twining stems are red to green when young, fading to grey with a semi-woody texture as they age. Clusters of red berries mature in the fall, providing food for other birds. In nurseries, you may find many named cultivars, so check the Latin on this one. Don't confuse it with the highly aggressive Japanese honeysuckle. Coral honeysuckle is tame by comparison.

Lonicera Albiflora, a native of the Hill Country and North Texas, is white bush honeysuckle that is non-aggressive and usually grows as a 4 feet tall deciduous bush with white flowers and vine-y branches that can reach up to 10'. The white flowers are followed by clusters of orange-red berries in the fall, which attract birds. Plant this honeysuckle in partial sun, where it can climb walls, columns, trellises, and fences. It, too, has high heat tolerance but low water requirements, and it adapts to many types of soil. The easiest way to propagate bush honeysuckle is by soft or semi-hardwood cuttings taken in late summer to fall. Seeds collected in late summer to early fall from ripe berries need to be cleaned immediately and must be stratified for 2–3 months.

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. The unusual, fragrant orange or pink flowers have lavender calyxes which bloom from late spring through to fall.

You may find Threadleaf Giant Hyssop labeled as Sunset Hyssop because of its colorful flowers. 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 large pot – three gallon or larger – be sure to give it excellent drainage. This plant does not like wet feet! It will need repotting every two to three years.



Threadleaf Giant Hyssop, Charlie McDonald, Public Domain

There are many other plants with tube-like flowers that attract hummingbirds. Some of these include Turk's cap (*Malvaviscus drummondii*), which thrives in sun or shade, Scarlet Beebalm (*Monarda didyma*), Bergamot (*Monarda*

fistulosa), Snapdragons, which are great for those early arriving hummers, Desert Willow (*Chilopsis linearis*), and Penstemons. The resources below provide more options for your landscape.

RESOURCES:

[“Hummingbirds”](#), Texas Parks & Wildlife

[“Esperanza, Yellow Bells, Hardy Yellow Trumpet, Trumpet-flower, Yellow Elder”](#), [“Flame Acanthus, Wright Anisacanth, Hummingbird Bush, Muicle”](#), [“Mealy Blue Sage”](#), Texas A&M AgriLife

[“Coral honeysuckle is the perfect vine for landscapes”](#), Native Plant Society of Texas

[“Yellow Bells or Esperanza”](#), [“Firewise Index Explanation”](#), Earth-Kind® Landscaping

[“Hummingbird Flowers – The Best 18 Plant Families for Natural Nectar”](#), The Hummingbird Society

[“Sunset Hyssop”](#), The National Gardening Association Plants Database

[“Sage, Mealy Blue”](#), Texas SmartScape

[“Anisacanthus quadrifidus ar. wrightii”](#), [“Lonicera albiflora”](#), Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center Plant Database