



Urban Harvest

## Prepare your Garden for the Hummingbird Migration

By Glenn Olsen

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The end of March to mid-May are fantastic months for bird migration throughout Texas and on the Upper Texas Gulf Coast. We can observe a number of bird species in our own backyards if we plant for them. We can also attract a variety of butterfly species with the proper plants.

The ruby-throated hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*), our smallest bird, will migrate through our area en route to their breeding grounds; approximately the eastern half of the United States, including Texas and as far north as southern Canada.

This tiny bird winters primarily in Mexico and Central America, and many of them will fly across the Gulf of Mexico and arrive in Texas in March and April. In the Gulf, there are no rest stops with flowers or feeders! Just imagine this tiny jewel of a bird (about one tenth of an ounce) making this non-stop marathon of a flight across the Gulf of Mexico! Their energy reserves will be almost depleted when they come ashore, and they will need to feed immediately after making this arduous non-stop flight.

This is where our help may prove invaluable for their journey. Much of the natural habitat, with the native plants that these hummingbirds depend upon for their survival, has been lost due to development. Fortunately, the ruby-throated hummingbird is one that can utilize our backyards if we have the proper plants for them to feed on.

These marvelous birds are primarily nectar feeders utilizing a wide variety of flowers, but tubular shaped flowers in the red range of color "may" be their favored flower type (there is debate).

I recommend native Texas plants such as scarlet sage (*Salvia coccinea*). Scarlet sage is extremely hardy and will grow in most any soil. It is very drought tolerant and can be planted in full sun to filtered sun.

Cross vine (*Bignonia capreolata*) is a great vine to attract hummingbirds as it begins to bloom



Photo By Glenn Olsen/Urban Harvest  
Salvia Coccinea

in March and continues through their spring migration. It is an excellent vine to plant under a live oak or any tree as it will grow quite well in heavier shade or in full sun so it is a very versatile plant. It does not strangle the tree.

Another good vine is coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*). This vine grows well in full sun to part sun but prefers soil that is reasonably well-draining. It is typically moderate in growth and could easily be grown on a decorative trellis.

The flowers of both coral honeysuckle and cross vine are red on the outside and yellow on the inside, which is an attractive color combination.

For a list of other native plants, go to [www.npsot.org/houston](http://www.npsot.org/houston) and click on suggested plants.

If native plants are not available, then I recommend appropriate plants from Mexico and Central America such as hummingbird bush (*Hamelia patens*), Mexican salvia (*Salvia leucantha*), shrimp plant (*Beloperone guttata*) and cigar plant (*Cuphea ignea*). Each of these plants will grow well in our soil and do not require supplemental watering. They are not aggressive, nor do they escape our gardens and become naturalized, something we want to avoid. Not all plants provide the same food value, and some horticultural varieties may provide very little if any sustenance, so try to avoid the hybrids.

Hummingbirds also feed on tiny insects such as flies and gnats, so other early flowering plants such as Mexican plum (*Prunus Mexicana*), Eastern redbud (*Cercis Canadensis*) and lantana (*Lantana horrida*) will also provide a valuable food source for hummingbirds.

Many people enjoy setting out hummingbird feeders. If you do this, the proper ratio is one cup of white sugar dissolved in 4 cups of warm water. Allow the mixture to cool before use. Using more sugar or adding red dye to the solution is not recommended. It is also extremely important to thoroughly wash the feeders every three to five days to prevent mold and fungus growth. Even small amounts of mold hidden inside the feeder may cause problems for the birds. Use only hot water and a bottlebrush.

Usually by the end of October, the vast majority of ruby-throated hummingbirds have migrated out of the United States. However, there are several other species that may show up in your yard during the winter months if there are food and shelter for them. So plant late-fall-blooming plants in your garden for them.

*Urban Harvest produces this column. Learn about gardening classes, community and school gardens, farmers' markets, organic landscaping and more at [www.urbanharvest.org](http://www.urbanharvest.org).*