

# Gardening for the Hummingbirds -- by Selinda Barkhuis



Male Anna's hummingbird singing in middle of winter.



Female Rufous Hummingbird on Red Valerian.



Hummingbirds spend 80% of the day perching.



Red hot pokers are a favorite of cedar waxwings as well.

## Hummingbirds on the Olympic Peninsula

- The most common hummingbirds on the Olympic Peninsula are the Rufous Hummingbirds, which overwinter in Mexico but summer here, and the Anna's Hummingbirds, which are now found here year-round.
- Hummingbirds have been seen on the same day at the same location along their migration route each year. Consistent feeding practices will lead to an increased hummingbird population over time.

## Habitat needs

- Hummingbirds spend as much as 80% of the day perching near their favorite nectar sources, and spend the night roosting in sheltered spaces in a state of suspended animation (to preserve energy) called "torpor."
- Female Rufous Hummingbirds tend to build nests low in conifers in spring, but higher up in deciduous trees in summer. Female Anna's Hummingbirds tend to build their nests on horizontal twigs or branches 6-20 feet up in deciduous trees near nectar sources.
- Plant brush and trees that meet these needs, including thick evergreens which provide sheltered spaces in winter.
- Like all birds, hummingbirds love taking baths but only in water less than ¼ inch deep. Mist-type water features are irresistible to hummingbirds.

## Red for hummingbirds, blue for bees, and purple for butterflies

- Hummingbirds rely on nectar to fuel their high metabolism and for water, but they also eat large amounts of small insects, larvae, insect eggs and spiders for fat, protein and salts (especially when feeding their young). They "glean" them from bark and foliage, and "hawk" them by flying out to capture them in mid-air. They may also sip tree sap (if nectar is scarce) and eat small amounts of ashes and sand (for minerals and salt) as well as pollen (for protein).
- Once you've caught their attention with the right colors, hummingbirds will explore what else there is, and they'll come back if they find what they like. Plant a variety of plants so that nectar is available as much as possible throughout the year. Include native plants because they are closely intertwined with the life cycle of Rufous Hummingbirds. Include winter-blooming plants for overwintering Anna's Hummingbirds.
- Avoid pesticides, herbicides, and non-organic fertilizers.

## Choosing plants

- Avoid "pollen-free" or "sterile" plant varieties because they tend to produce way less nectar; pollen is an important food source for bees.
- Avoid "double-bloom" varieties because nectar may be difficult to access.
- In general, avoid "hybrid" varieties because nectar/pollen production tends to suffer when plants are hybridized.
- Before buying, check Sunset Western Garden Book and/or davesgarden.com (choose "Plantfiles" under "Guides and Information").
- Before ordering, check catalog and on-line vendors at davesgarden.com (select "The Garden Watchdog" under "Products and Sources").
- The best place to buy plants is your favorite local nursery.

### Olympic Peninsula native plants

- Red-flowering currant
- Salmonberry
- Orange native honeysuckle
- Oregon grape
- Indian plum

### Winter-blooming shrubs

- Witch Hazel
- Sarcococca (Sweet Box)
- Arbutus
- *Mahonia x media* 'Charity'
- Flowering maple

## Some favorite perennial flowers that do well around here

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bleeding heart</li> <li>• Columbine</li> <li>• Red hot poker</li> <li>• Hyssop (Agastache)</li> <li>• Bee Balm</li> <li>• Foxglove – unless considered noxious</li> <li>• Honeysuckle</li> <li>• Delphiniums &amp; Hollyhocks</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crocosmia</li> <li>• Penstemon</li> <li>• Lupine</li> <li>• Purple coneflowers</li> <li>• Cardinal flower</li> <li>• Salvia</li> <li>• Cape Fuchsia (phygelius)</li> <li>• Hardy Fuchsia</li> </ul> |
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Scarlet Runner Beans make a beautiful edible fence.

### Scarlet Runner Beans

- Scarlet Runner Beans are a favorite of people and hummingbirds alike.
- The flowers are edible and great in salads. Both the young green pods and the beautiful dry-shelled beans are delicious, and the seed will breed true if only one runner bean variety is planted. (Like all beans, the raw seeds contain a poisonous protein that is destroyed when cooked.)
- They grow as vines and tolerate shade and cooler weather better than most bean varieties. For best results, grow a short season variety with red flowers (such as Scarlet Emperor Beans). Keep plants well watered. They are relatively light feeders.

**Cats.** To deter cats, choose taller plant varieties and consider fencing your hummingbird garden with a floppy, unstable fence with at least 2 inch mesh so that birds like Rufous Towhees can hop through the mesh (and not be trapped) if a cat does make it into the fenced area. Use light-weight fence posts, keep fencing floppy, and angle it outward if possible. Most cats climb, rather than jump, over fences, and they may not climb a floppy fence. This arrangement is easily moved to fence in whatever plants are most popular with the hummingbirds at any given time.



Placing the feeder next to a window has many benefits.

### Hummingbird feeders

- Put out only as many feeders as you can maintain, because dirty feeders are a hazard to bird health. Feeders should be cleaned and filled with a fresh solution at least three times a week in hot weather or if the feeder is heated, and at least every five days from fall through spring. Find the right sized bottlebrushes for your feeders for easy cleaning.
- Choose feeders that are easy-to-clean (rather than fancy or breakable) and that don't leak (leaking attracts ants and wasps). I.e., HummZinger saucer type feeders include a built-in ant-moat (effective if feeder is hung) and deter wasps (which cannot reach the solution). They are also easy to clean and relatively easy to winterize.
- Use a 4:1 ratio of water:plain white table sugar (white sugar is sucrose, just like nectar). Boil the water, add the sugar, stir to dissolve, and let cool completely before using. Store excess in refrigerator for 2 weeks max.
- Do NOT use honey or any other sugar substitute as that may kill birds. No need to use red food coloring. Avoid commercial solutions because they are expensive and may contain harmful ingredients.
- Place feeders where they can be seen from the house and easily accessed for cleaning. Place them in the shade to minimize mold. Place feeders out of site from each other to minimize feuding. Place feeders either less than 2 feet or more than 20 feet from a window to minimize window collisions.



HummZinger's saucer type feeder

- Leak-resistant (deters ants)
- Built-in ant-moat (fill with water)
- Wasp-resistant (can't reach)
  - Very easy to clean
  - Easy to winterize



Perfect Little Brushes

### Feeding hummingbirds through freezing winter weather

- DO NOT adjust the ratio of water to sugar mixture, as higher sugar levels may cause fatal hardening of the liver.
- Place feeders under covered porches or deep eaves (preferably next to a heat-leaking window or door), or cover them with wide snow baffles. Bring feeders in at night and put back out before sun rise (hummingbirds start feeding at very early dawn); alternate between two feeders during the day.
- To winterize a feeder, place a 16 oz. HummZinger saucer-type feeder in a 9" x 1 1/4" pyrex pie plate and apply gentle heat source to pie plate, keeping feeder easy to clean. Whatever electrical device you use, make sure it is in good condition, and that the cord is not frayed. Plug it into a properly installed GFCI outlet only.
- Plug any device that lacks a built-in thermostat into a "Thermo Cube Thermostatically Controlled Outlet" (turns power on at 35F and off at 45F), and plug Cube into GFCI outlet. Waterproof any extension cord connection with taped up zip-lock baggies or commercially available "Waterproof Extension Cord Connectors."

### Perky Pet pinch waist style feeder



Accessories:

- Ant moat
- Brushes
- Extra bee guards

Choose an easy-to-clean feeder and the right brushes.

**- Do NOT overheat the solution -  
- Be SAFE with electricity outside -**