

2018

Spring Home Improvement

Lawn & Garden



Photo/Tesa Glass

Ruby-throated hummingbirds are in the area after a long and arduous trip from Mexico and Central America. If you use feeders to attract hummingbirds, take them in at night so they don't also attract bears. Another option: Plant vines that attract hummingbirds.

Make sure you're ready for hummers

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Watching hummingbirds can be mesmerizing, and there are ways to attract them for easy viewing.

Ruby-throated hummingbirds are common in North Carolina and the only species of hummingbird that breeds in this state, according to information from North Carolina State University. They arrive in late March for the breeding season and leave in September or October, migrating to Mexico and Central America. The male has a ruby-red throat, white collar, and green back and forked tail, while the female has a green back and tail feathers with black, white and gray-green bands.

The birds build small nests of lichens and spider webs on top of horizontal tree limbs 10 to 30 feet off the ground. There are several ways to attract hummingbirds to your yard and porch, including a hummingbird feeder. Hummingbird feeders should be kept clean to avoid harming the birds and the basic recipe for homemade hummingbird nectar is easily found online — 1 cup of white sugar to 4 cups of water and completely dissolved. Some say to use boiling water when making the nectar, others say to just make sure the sugar is completely dissolved.

"The reason for boiling is not to make syrup, but to drive out the chlorine in the water and to kill mold and

yeast spores that might be in the sugar," information from The Wild Bird Shop states. "This will help make the nectar last longer both in the feeder and in your refrigerator."

But, filling a hummingbird feeder with a solution of sugar and water can attract unwanted guests to the table as well.

Bears are attracted by all food, and a 32-ounce hummingbird feeder contains 775 calories of sweets. According to information from Bear Education and Resources of Highlands, if you use a hummingbird feeder, be sure to take it indoors at night.

There is another alternative to hummingbird feeders. "Growing flowers is a great approach to attracting hummingbirds," said Sonya Carpenter, director of the Highlands Biological Foundation. "Bears are relatively indifferent to flowers."

Darin Keener of Highlands Lawn and Garden said container gardens and hanging baskets are one way to attract hummingbirds.

"Plant flowers in them that have a vase or bell shape," Keener said, adding impatiens and petunias are two that he recommends.

"Hummingbirds are drawn to red flowers," Carpenter said. "They like flowers that have deep throats. A couple of examples are honeysuckle vine — be sure you plant

the native one, not the Japanese type. Native honeysuckle vines are hummingbird magnets."

Carpenter said flowers with vines are an excellent choice for attracting hummingbirds, adding that trumpet vine and bee balm are examples of indigenous flowers that attract the birds.

"Vines are great; they are going to climb," Carpenter said. "Instead of a hummingbird feeder on your porch, you can have hummingbird vines on your post."

Another flower that is attractive to hummingbirds is the crocosmia. "It is not a native flower, but hummingbirds love it," Carpenter said. "It has lance-shaped leaves. ... It is grown from a bulb, and when it comes up, it forms a mass, like a day-lily almost with a bunch of beautiful red flowers that mature."

It's not too late to plant the bulbs, and Carpenter said the crocosmia is also available as a plant at area nurseries.



Heirloom ornamentals have stories to tell

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For gardeners looking to breathe some new life into their plots this summer, it might be a good idea to spend some time getting back to their plants' roots.

While many people have heard of heirloom tomatoes or maybe a few other vegetables passed down through the family over a few generations, the idea of a plant with a history isn't limited to just grandma's one-of-a-kind tomatoes.

"It's easy to see in edible things, but it's there for ornamental things, too," said Ezra Gardiner, who oversees operations at Winding Stair Farms Nursery.

Tracing the lineage of a plant can add a touch of history to the garden or yard and tie property owners to their landscape, with each plant telling its own story. Sometimes, a plant's history can be traced back hundreds of years or more.

"Speaking very historically, there are some old plants where there's a question as to whether they may have appeared in places

like this before a very, very early change in climate pushed them down to, say, Florida or somewhere like that," Gardiner said.

One such tree, *Franklinia alatamaha*, is believed to have existed in this region many years before the arrival of European settlers and the famed botanist William Bartram, who collected cuttings of the tree from the Altamaha River Valley in Florida on his first walkthrough of the region in 1776 to bring back to Pennsylvania to cultivate and sell.

"When he went back the next time, that population of *Franklinia* had been wiped out," Gardiner said. "There's an argument to be made — I don't know how valid — that any Franklin tree you find is from a cutting of Bartram's. And if you go up there and see those old ones that are only a couple generations removed, you're seeing a close historic relative."

Other heirloom plants' appeal is less about the mystique of their origin and more focused on the fact that they've proven themselves in this landscape for many generations, growing more resilient and adopting unique



Photos/Carter Giegerich

Ezra Gardiner checks out an heirloom ornamental at Winding Stairs Farms Nursery.

traits along the way.

"Especially with the natives, we have things like redbuds that we see blooming all around, and there are some interesting weeping types and dwarf types, types that have gold foliage instead of the red and purple," Gardiner said. "They're older, developed cultivars that have been selected rather than constructed, and you would see something with an interesting facet and breed them for that. It's a wonderful native plant, it's from the area and has a history here still."

Finding an heirloom cultivar with an interesting quirk or appealing quality can also lead gardeners along the path to learning about the plant's origins and earlier varieties.

Cultivating these adaptations of native species and their predecessors is also a good way of responsibly maintaining and improving the landscape without unnecessary disruption to the ecosystem in and around the property, Gardiner said.

"They're responsible cultivars, so they still perform as they should in the ecosystem but they just add that little bit of interest," he said. "It's not that they're better than the native, they're just unique and you get to see a different version. To me, too, a lot of those cultivars make me go out and find the original, the straight species. It gives you a little extra appreciation for that at the same time."

For many people, heirloom varieties are a way to connect to their own personal history as well. Some gardeners might choose their okra plants based on what's been grown in this area for hundreds of years, or plant a tree that was popular in a place they've always loved visiting or have always wanted to see. For others, the heritage of their favorite plants might be a lot simpler.

"It's all those kinds of stories," Gardiner said. "But it might also just be somebody saying 'My grandmother always loved Virginia Beauty apples.'"



The Hewes Crab dwarf apple originated in Virginia, most likely during the early 1700s.