

Just Add Water

More and more customers want it all: A beautiful garden that's also a magnet for birds. It's easy to serve both interests with products that dish up what birds need most: water.

By Val Cunningham

Retailers looking for a way to draw in new customers, build business with existing customers and give the bottom line a boost will benefit from connecting the dots between the two hottest leisure-time activities in the country: gardening and bird watching.

There is at least one gardener in four out of five households in America, making it the nation's most popular outdoor activity. Nature watchers are almost as numerous, with 66 million adults who observe, feed and photograph wildlife, and birds are their primary interest.

The good news for garden center retailers is there is a high degree of crossover between these two groups: More and more gardeners are becoming fascinated with birds and increasing numbers of bird watchers are recognizing the drawing power of a well-planned garden.

This creates the perfect opportunity for savvy retailers to create some business-building synergy. You needn't transform your store into a wild bird center to serve both kinds of customers. Instead, think one word — water — and you have the key to opening the door to new sales. If you haven't yet dipped your toe in the world of water, now is the time. If you're already stocking birdbaths and pond liners, enhance their customer appeal by promoting how useful they are for drawing birds to the garden.

Be Savvy

One way to differentiate your business from the big box stores is by offering expertise to your customers. Both of the demographic groups, the gardeners and the birders, are asking, "What's the most important thing I can do to attract birds to my garden?" The answer is easy and doesn't involve fancy feeders, nifty birdhouses or colorful



Birdbath Basics

Birds prefer birdbaths with rough surfaces that allow their feet to grip. Avoid slippery ceramic basin interiors. The basin should be 2-2½ inches deep, since small birds can drown in deeper bowls. Sloping sides also are better for smaller birds, allowing them to hang out near the shallow edge.

lawn ornaments. The single biggest backyard bird magnet is water.

The three "must haves" for birds are food, shelter and water, and it may surprise you to learn that water is often the most difficult to find. Not only do birds need to drink several times each day, they need to bathe frequently to keep their feathers in top condition. From the far West to the humid South, from temperate

zones to coastal areas, birds are always on the lookout for water.

Add this knowledge to two other emerging trends: More and more gardeners and birders are looking for ways to connect to nature and they want to enhance the backyard's aesthetics as well. An elegantly simple solution is to make a water source an integral part of the garden.

When we provide birds with a reliable source of water, they become regular visitors. The reward for gardeners who provide a birdbath, dish or pond full of water is hours of pleasure as they watch the neighborhood birds enjoy the local watering hole. Anecdotal evidence indicates that a birdbath or pond brings in three times as many birds than bird feeders alone, a powerful incentive for gardeners who want to increase their bird visitors.

Providing a water source is also a great way to boost a backyard's attractiveness for the kinds of birds who aren't interested in bird seed. This category includes some backyard favorites, such as robins and bluebirds, warblers and flycatchers, tanagers, wrens and hummingbirds.



Top: Birdbaths are very popular with robins, and a fountain arrangement adds further interest. (Photo: Val Cunningham) **Bottom:** A cascading pond appeals to birds and humans alike. (Photo: Backyard Nature Products)

Water World

Birds aren't fussy: They'll drink out of a pie plate or investigate a simple pail dripping into a birdbath. Moving water attracts more birds, since they're naturally drawn to the sound of water flowing, splashing or tumbling over rocks.

There are many products on the market these days that are functional as well as attractive. Ponds are gaining in popularity, in part because the materials have improved so much in the past 20 years. With a flexible rubber liner, nearly anyone can dig a hole and create an "instant pond." Some gardeners enjoy creating a mini-wetland full of water plants and fish, a high-maintenance approach that requires filtration and careful monitoring.

An easier route for the home gardener is to install a pond then plant around the edges to create great visual interest. Adding a fountain or cascade makes the pond even more attractive to both birds and humans. Birds are drawn to the sound of the water and gardeners are drawn to the tranquility created by the new water feature.

Birds On A Pedestal

If a pond is too expensive and/or too much work for a customer, suggest a birdbath as a simpler (and cheaper) solution. A neutral-toned birdbath on a matching pedestal surrounded by blooming plants or shrubs is a lovely oasis for thirsty birds. Think of a sand-colored birdbath planted within a bed of hostas, ferns and native grasses or sitting among pots of showy annuals.

Birdbaths are a great product for retailers because they are a year-round item. Birds need to drink every day of the year and a birdbath is the easiest way to satisfy this need. In colder climates, either a low-volt heater or a bath with built-in heater keeps the water open.

A few customers may feel that even a birdbath is too much trouble. But the truth is that spraying out and refilling a birdbath adds only two minutes a day to the gardening routine. There's no need to worry about harboring West Nile Virus, since the daily cleanout prevents mosquito eggs from hatching, and the daily water bath is beneficial to the garden.

Water, the surest way to a bird's heart, brings new interest to the garden. Retailers who stock a variety of water-related products will discover a key to new sales to bird watchers who garden and gardeners who bird watch.

Val Cunningham is a freelance writer and editor based in St. Paul, Minn. She can be reached at valwrites@comcast.net.

LearnMore!

For more information related to this article, go to www.lgsmag.com/lm.cfm/lg030703

Tube bird feeder

This pearlized ceramic tube feeder is one of three bird feeders in the Pearlized Collection. It features an iridescent blue finish with a hand-painted, raised finish. The collection also includes birdhouses and 3-bell chimes. Custom Décor. (800) 441-8818. **Write in 1413**



Hummingbird Heaven

Many backyard birders and gardeners are eager to attract hummingbirds, and water is the answer. Hummingbirds are fiends for water and bathe often to remove sticky nectar from their feathers. They don't immerse themselves in water but love to zip through a spray or mist attachment or "surf bathe" on wet leaves.



Birdhouse

This birdhouse is constructed of exterior-grade plyboard, topped with a black, shingled roof and finished with a non-toxic outdoor paint. The bottom opens for cleaning. Openings measure 1 1/4 inches. Home Bazaar. (516) 827-7771. **Write in 1416**

A & J Designs Unlimited Inc.



New Large-Capacity Hopper Feeders

Feeder capacity up to 10 lbs. of seed
All with removable roofs
All our products are hand made in the USA



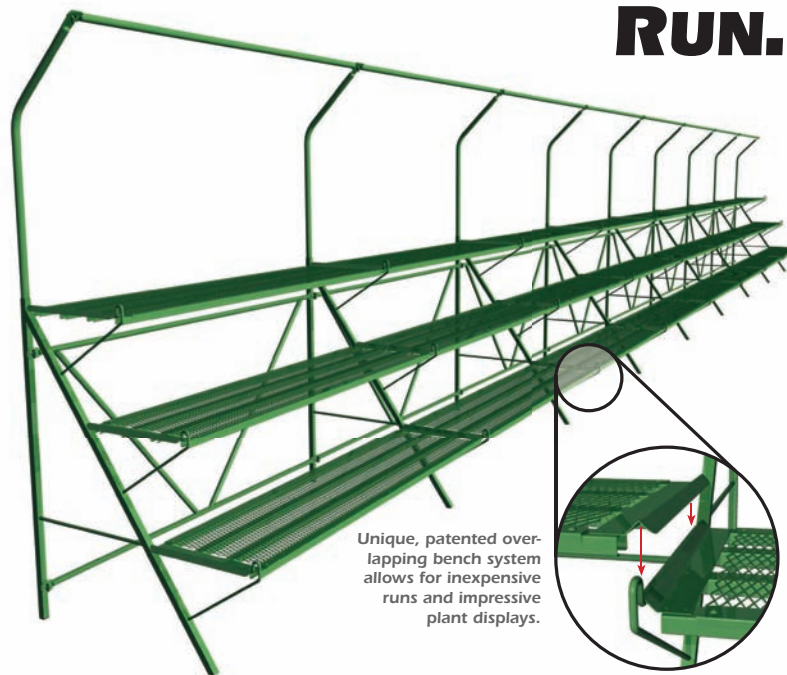
Feeder and houses made out of cellular pvc

- No splitting
- No Rotting
- No Painting

Call or Email for Catalogue and Pricing
Raleigh, NC • 919-664-8383 • Fax 919-664-8003
Email: tjchorba@bellsouth.net

Write in 762

THE BEST DISPLAY IN THE LONG RUN.



Unique, patented overlapping bench system allows for inexpensive runs and impressive plant displays.



Stronger than plastic, more efficient than block and plank, easier to set up, quicker to move, long-lasting and available in multi-unit runs. What else could you want in a display system for your garden center?

Plus, we have 18 different models from which to choose. No matter what your needs, a Poly-Tex display system is the best in the long run. Give us a call at **800-852-3443** or visit poly-tex.com for more information.



where fresh ideas are grown™

©2006 Poly-Tex, Inc. All rights reserved.

Write in 828