



Bird Food: It doesn't always come in a bag.

by Jean Laughman, UConn Home and Garden Education Center

As seasons begin to change, the variety of birds we see in Connecticut's landscape also begins to change. Sales of birdseed for feeders increases too as we try to supply the energy birds need as temperatures cool. But, just like humans, birds need a variety of foods in their diet to stay healthy.

A variety of small trees and large shrubs can provide nutritious food for both migrating and year-round bird populations while also adding spring interest and fall color to woody borders and perennial beds. Fall (mid-August through mid-October) is a good time to plant smaller trees and large shrubs since the ground temperature and sunlight still provides enough time to allow the plants to establish a good root structure to survive winter. By planting in the fall and providing support during spring growth, these plants can produce fruit that will attract birds through several seasons.

A small easy-to-grow tree is the American cranberry viburnum (*Viburnum opulus* var. *americanum* Ait). This tree is hardy in growing zones 2 to 7, and can put on up to 3 feet of new growth each year. It prefers sunny to partially sunny locations, does well in fertile, well-drained soil, and tolerates a wide range of soil types. This tree can withstand some drought but does appreciate occasional supplemental watering. Since it can be pruned to control its typical 15-foot mounded shape, it can serve as a screening hedge.

The American cranberry viburnum produces clusters of self-pollinating white flowers in June so only one plant is needed to produce pollen and fruit. The fruit is similar to the low-bush cranberry in texture and taste. The bright red fruit, about 3/8-inch in diameter with a large center seed, ripens in late fall. Because the fruit is tart, it is not the first choice of birds in the early winter; however, birds will choose the fruit as winter progresses when the fruit gets sweeter after freezing, and they can get at the seeds.

When purchasing a cranberry viburnum, it is important to look for the American variety. There is a European variety (*Viburnum opulus*) that produces bitter, inedible fruit. It has been found naturalized and growing widely in central Maine. The American cranberry viburnum is not attractive to deer, and is nearly disease free. The viburnum leaf beetle is the most common pest of the tree, with larvae and adult beetles capable of complete defoliation. Trees can recover from

defoliation the following year; however, if defoliation occurs on successive years, the tree can die.

The shadbush or serviceberry (*Amelanchier arborea* – prev. *A. Canadensis*) is another often overlooked medium-sized tree for hardiness zones 4 to 9 that provides bird food through the summer and lovely gold to orange fall color. It is a low maintenance, sun-loving to shade-tolerant tree that grows to 25 feet. The name “shadbush” comes from the fact that its masses of white flowers generally occur at the same time that shad move into rivers in early spring to spawn. This native tree prefers soils that are fertile and well-drained, and it tolerates a wide range of soil types but it does not tolerate prolonged drought conditions. It is especially attractive along wooded edges and in borders with other native plants. This slow-growing tree does tend to sucker, which can give the plant a shrubby shape. Suckers can be trimmed to maintain a tree-like appearance.

Clusters of drooping white flowers appear in April to May, often before leaves appear. Early fruit is blueberry-like and turns from red to purple by mid-summer when it is enjoyed by various song birds, including the cedar waxwing. It is also the host plant for the red-spotted purple and Viceroy butterflies. The tree is seldom bothered by deer; it has few insects and diseases that cause severe problems.

There are other popular small trees to consider that provide fruit and all-year interest including the buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) and elderberry (*Sambucus nigra* ssp: *Canadensis* - common elderberry), both of which tolerate moist soils. Shrubs that produce berries with seeds include the high bush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), and the flowering raspberry (*Rubus odoratus*). They can tolerate a wide range of soil types and produce fruit that matures from mid- to late summer. The flowering raspberry aggressively suckers when grown in ideal conditions so be sure there is enough room for this pick.

For questions on home landscape or garden topics, call the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at 877.486.6271, visit the web site at www.ladybug.uconn.edu, or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.



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<https://extension.unh.edu/blog/fall-good-time-plant-trees-and-shrubs>

<https://www.mortonarb.org/trees-plants/tree-and-plant-advice/horticulture-care/fall-planting-trees-and-shrubs>