THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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Backyard Birder: Birds are beneficial to the garden

A small birdbath attracted a California thrasher. (Photo by Jodie Cook)

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March 2, 2018 at 4:12 am

If you see songbirds fluttering around your yard, it's more than just a beautiful sight; it's a sign of a healthy environment.

"You want to attract birds to establish a balance in the garden," said Jodie Cook, a master gardener and owner of My Avant Garden. Her Orange County-based company partners with local water districts and the Tree of Life Nursery in San Juan Capistrano to help homeowners transform their lawns into native gardens.

"The ultimate goal of a native garden is to create a place where nature is in balance and the health of each creature in it is supported," Cook said. "Ideally, we'd like to create robust places that stay healthy with minimal interventions from us."

Including diverse plant species supports a multitude of different insects, birds, and other organisms, which interact in a complex web in which the whole is greater than the parts, she explained.

"The more diverse the garden, the healthier it generally is," she said. "And a diverse bird population in a garden is a sign of a garden's health."

Birds do their part by keeping insects in check. Insect-eating birds such as wrens, warblers and towhees eat aphids, mosquitoes, spiders, caterpillars and other insects that we consider garden pests.

"Birds are the least toxic method to managing pests," Cook said. Birds consume thousands of insects, especially in the spring when they're feeding their young.

Seed-eating birds such as finches and sparrows contribute to a healthy garden by keeping weeds from taking over. These birds can consume great quantities of weed seeds, thus helping gardeners control unwanted plants.

When birds are present, it eliminates the need for toxic insecticides and herbicides.

And let's not forget the many species of birds that play a role in natural plant pollination. Hummingbirds are especially important in the pollination of native wildflowers.

"I tell people to install bird feeders and birdbaths, so that birds know it's a safe place," Cook said.

According to Audubon California, birds are one of the best indicators of environmental health – healthy native bird populations signal a healthy ecology.

More than 600 bird species call California home. Invite a variety of bird species to your yard by providing a source of food and water. Layering tall, medium and low plants throughout the yard provides shelter and allows birds to take cover when they need it.

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