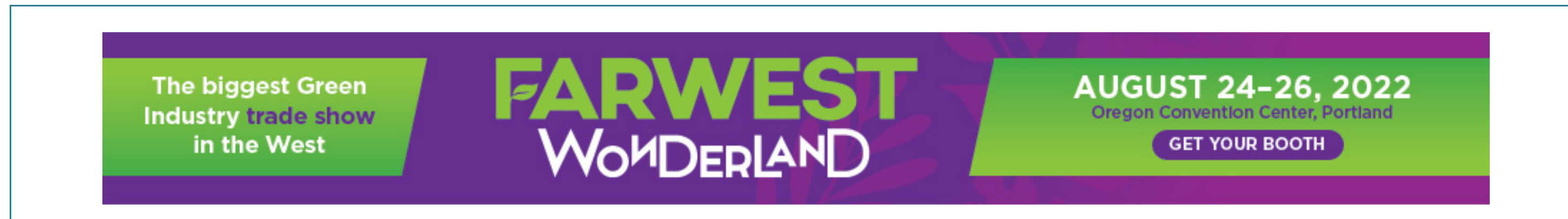


FEATURES

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# Attracting Fish & Fowl

Matthew Olson



*Pictured: Small ponds can be a great choice to attract wildlife and enjoy Koi or other pond fish species.*

The past two years have been unique, allowing homeowners to spend more time in their backyards. Extra time at home allowed many people to observe nature in their yard for the first time. As a result, consumers are interested in finding more ways to attract wildlife to their yards.

A growing interest in backyard wildlife presents an opportunity for retailers to connect with consumers through providing products that encourage habitats for birds, fish and other wildlife.

## Creating a Bird Haven

The pandemic sparked interest in backyard birding among people of all ages. You can find birds almost anywhere, but homeowners want more than the occasional bird passing through the yard. They want to create a backyard habitat that attracts various birds and provides shelter, food and water.

Bird feeders are an effective way to attract birds, as they provide an easy source of food. I spoke with Cristin Smith, the Director of Product and Marketing at Nature's Way, near Cleveland. She emphasizes that homeowners want to observe many types of birds.

"Consumers want to attract a wide variety of birds with a single feeder," she says. Seed blends attract various birds, but this creates a mess when birds try to access their favorite seed. Black oil sunflowers appeal to many types of birds without the mess. As retailers, we need to educate customers in a way that's easy to understand.

"We pride ourselves in educational packaging. We call out the features and benefits, and why they're important," Cristin notes. "Somebody new to the bird category may not understand why they need a certain seed in a feeder. Consumers want to know what birds they can attract with different feeders."

According to an industry survey, the typical birder has three to four feeders. "Typically, customers are looking for one to two feeders that attract a wide variety of birds and one to two that are more specialized, like hummingbird feeders," Cristin says.

Feeders come in many shapes, allowing homeowners to try different types of feeders. "For beginning birders, we like to recommend a tray feeder. It enables you to use a wider variety of seeds if you want to experiment," she says.

Tray feeders provide more space to attract larger birds, like mourning doves. "Hopper feeders with suet cages are nice because they offer various feed options," she adds.

Feeding birds is beneficial throughout the year, but winter is essential. Natural food sources are scarce then, making it difficult for birds to maintain the energy needed to survive the cold weather. Early spring is crucial as well, for when the birds are coming back from migration and need to fuel up quickly.

Another way to help birds in winter is by providing a source of water, like a heated birdbath. "It's important in the summer months, but a water source is also important during winter," Cristin says.

## Adding Natives to the Mix

Attracting birds is more than using feeders. The surrounding landscape plays a vital role in creating bird habitat. Birds receive only 25% of their nutrition from feeders, meaning they rely on natural food sources outside the feeder.

"You need to provide some natural options to help round out their diet," Cristin says. Native plants offer a variety of nutrients needed to create a sustainable diet. Trees and shrubs provide seeds and fruit—a great source of nutrients. You can maximize the value of native plants by planting different species that bloom at various times, creating aesthetic value for homeowners.

Gail Stroh is the lawn and garden department head at The Bruce Company in Madison, Wisconsin. She helps gardeners and birders by offering educational workshops.

"We share info about how to attract and keep birds in the landscape with lists of bird-friendly trees, shrubs and perennials," she said. "Putting in plants that attract birds is a great way to keep them around longer."

## Water Benefits Wildlife

Water features are growing in popularity as homeowners create a place to relax in their yard. Small water features come in many shapes and sizes, while providing benefits for wildlife. Gail and her staff highlight these benefits for their customers.

"We have a beautiful indoor display pond. We also carry Aquascape's pond supplies, Koi, and an excellent selection of hardy and tropical pond plants."



he enthusiasm for water features comes from the water, but plants are also significant contributors to these features.

"Aquatic plants provide places for fish to hide, create oxygen for aquatic life and add beauty to the feature," Gail adds. You can use a variety of perennial and annual plants in water features. Water lilies are versatile species that can be grown as annuals or perennials, and come in many varieties with different flower colors and sizes.

*Pictured: Consumers like to have more than one type of feeder to attract many different types of birds.*

Brian Helfrich, vice president of construction at Aquascape Inc., near Chicago, emphasizes the importance of plants in a water feature.

"How you decorate with plants make or break the entire feature," he notes, adding plants give the feature a natural look and benefit the surrounding wildlife. "There are endless possibilities with aquatic plants and the key thing you're looking for when choosing aquatic plants is the size of the pond."

A giant water lily in a small pond would look out of place. You should scale the plants appropriately for the size of the pond.

Fish are an excellent way to add wildlife to a water feature. Koi and other pond fish species entertain consumers and teach them about fish. A water feature doesn't need to be large to support fish. For example, features that are 6-ft. by 8-ft. can support a variety of fish.

Consumers in cold climates may be concerned about the fish surviving frigid winters. The proper depth is critical for fish survival.

"Most folks will tell you 3-ft. is what you need, but we've been building ponds in the Chicagoland area for 27 years, and Koi are surviving in 2-ft.-deep ponds," Brian says.

Water also attracts a variety of wildlife, from insects to mammals. As Brian says, to quote the famous line, "If you build it, they will come." **GP**

*Matthew Olson is a professional horticulturist and garden writer. He regularly writes articles about gardening for consumers and industry professionals. You can reach him at matt@mattolsonhorticulture.com.*



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