

HABITAT - the arrangement of food, water, cover, and space - IS THE KEY.

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Forward

Welcome to the Winter Issue of Habi-Chat! In this issue, you will learn about one of my favorite berry-producing shrubs, the chokeberry as well as two commonly confused woodpeckers- the downy and the hairy. In addition, you will also find a homemade suet recipe, tips for winter pruning, and a fun scavenger hunt for kids! I hope you enjoy this issue!

If there is a particular topic that you would like to see on our site, then please don't hesitate to contact me to let me know! My information can be found at the bottom of this newsletter. Happy Holidays!



Maryland Native Plant Profile:

Native Plant Profile: Red Chokeberry (*Photinia pyrifolia*)

Red chokeberry is one of the striking plants in my winter garden. While most shrubs and small trees are bare this time of year, chokeberry is sporting its fabulously colorful berries. Red chokeberry is shrub in the Rose family (Rosaceae) that can grow up to 13 feet in height. This shrub can be found throughout the State in forested wetlands, upland forests, fields, and dunes. It can tolerate infrequent flooding and even salt from time to time. Red chokeberry prefers sunny to partially shaded conditions in slightly acidic soil.



Red chokeberry in bloom by Bob Gutowski, Wikimedia Commons

Red chokeberry leaves are alternate and simple with slightly toothed margins. They have a glossy green color to them, and if you look closely, the center of the leaf has small, black hairs running down its mid-vein that resemble ants on a twig. The “ants” are a great identification feature for chokeberries! In the fall, the leaves turn hues of orange and red, creating remarkable color.

In late spring, red chokeberries produce a fragrant cluster of small white flowers. Usually, these flowers are popular for a number of pollinators which happily consume the nectar and pollen. By September, the fruits begin to develop and turn a rich red color. The fruits persist on the shrub throughout much of the winter as it takes several freezes for the berries to become palatable to wildlife. The fruits become a feast for songbirds and small mammals in the dead of winter when many other food sources are not available. The shrub’s common name is due to the tart and astringent taste to its berries.

Red chokeberry grows relatively slow, but it is certainly worth the wait! The shrubs can also be pruned into hedges to fit certain landscapes. Black chokeberry (*Photinia melanocarpa*) is a slightly smaller relative that grows in similar habitats and sports purplish berries in the fall and winter.



*Red chokeberries take a couple freezes to get ripe!
By Kerry Wixted*

Maryland Native Wildlife

Downy & Hairy Woodpeckers (*Picoides pubescens* & *Picoides villosus*)

Downy and hairy woodpeckers are two look-a-like species that often visit backyards. The hairy woodpecker is the larger of the two species. It sports a bill almost as long as its head, but the diminutive downy woodpecker has a bill that is usually less than half the depth of the head. Both species are flecked in black and white barring. Males are only distinguishable from females by a small red patch at the back of their heads.



Male downy (left) and hairy (right) woodpeckers by Tgies001, Wikimedia Commons and AlanD. Wilson, www.naturespicsonline.com. Note bill length for comparison.

Hairy woodpeckers are medium-sized birds that can be found year-round throughout much of North America and through parts of Central America. Hairy woodpeckers inhabit mature forests as well as backyards and parks. Over 75% of their diet is made up of insects such as wood-boring beetles and bark beetles, making them a beneficial predator in many landscapes. Hairy woodpeckers have even been known to consume the invasive emerald ash borer larvae! Hairy woodpeckers nest in tree cavities in the spring. Females lay a clutch of 3-6 eggs which take just under 2 weeks to incubate. Hairy woodpeckers typically make a short, sharp 'peek' note. Both sexes will also drum on trees year-round.

Downy woodpeckers are sparrow-sized woodpeckers that can be found year-round throughout much of the United States. Unlike hairy woodpeckers, downy woodpeckers rarely make it into Central America. These woodpeckers can be found in woodlots, fields, and backyards. Oftentimes, they can be seen perching on reeds or goldenrod, attempting to extract larvae in plant galls. Like their larger cousins, downy woodpeckers also consume beetle larvae and nest in tree cavities. The typical downy woodpecker brood consists of 3-8 eggs that take 12 days to incubate. When excited, downy woodpeckers will sound off with several very sharp 'pik' notes. Similar to other woodpeckers, both sexes will drum to attract mates and to mark territory.



Hairy woodpecker with food for young by Alan Vernon, Wikimedia Commons

Both species of woodpecker readily will visit yards supplemented with suet and sunflower seeds, especially in the winter time! In the spring, standing dead trees (snags) are great breeding habitat for many species of woodpeckers which excavate nests. Abandoned woodpecker nests are often used by a plethora of other birds including warblers and even owls!

Feeding Wildlife: DIY Suet

As the temperatures drop, many birds and other wildlife see a drop in their traditional food resources. Because of this, winter is one of the best times of year to give wildlife a hand! Suet is an easy and cheap way to provide much needed fat and protein for birds in the winter. You can either purchase suet from the store, or you can make your own with the following recipe. Birds that enjoy suet include woodpeckers, nuthatches, wrens, chickadees, and tufted titmice.

Homemade Suet Recipe

Ingredients:

- 1 ½ lb of rendered beef tallow or lard
- 2 cups of quality birdseed
- 2 cups of black oil sunflower seeds
- 2 cups of whole grain flour
- 1 cup of peanuts, dried (no sugar added) fruit, or a mix



Procedure:

1. Mix seed, peanuts, and flour in a large mixing bowl.
2. Melt tallow or lard over low heat. Do not use high heat or a lid on the pot as the fat can catch fire.
3. Once melted, add dry ingredients.
4. Line a 9x13 pan with parchment paper and pour suet concoction into it. As an alternative, you can also use a muffin tin lined with baking cups.
5. Let it cool. Let the mixture cool for 3-4 hours until hard then cut into 6 squares. Serve!



Quick Note: Avoid placing homemade suet out on days that are 70 degrees or warmer. The warmer temperatures allow the suet to spoil and/or melt. Melted suet can coat beaks and feathers which can be dangerous to birds. When the temperature is that warm, the birds usually have enough natural food sources anyways!

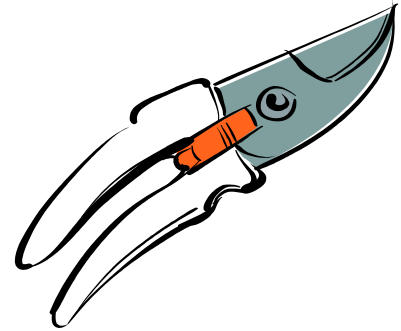
Want Winter Habitat Tips? Check out this previous [Winter Habi-chat here.](#)

Habitat Tips: Pruning in the Winter

Winter is a great time to prune many plant species in backyard wildlife habitat gardens. Winter provides better access, visibility, and decreased chance for the spread of disease.

Pruning Basics:

- Never prune without a purpose! Are you interested in training the plant? Improving plant health? Controlling growth? Promoting safety?
- Know when to prune. You can cause significant damage to a plant by pruning it out of season.
- If cutting back to the trunk, then prune just above the branch collar.
- If cutting back part of a branch, prune back to a visible set of buds.



When pruning twigs and small branches, it is best to prune the plant back to an intersecting branch or vigorous bud. If you choose to cut to the bud, then choose a bud which is pointed in the direction you want the new growth to pursue. When cutting to an intersecting branch, choose a branch that forms an angle less than 45 degrees with the branch you are removing.

If you are removing a larger branch, then the cuts should be flush with the collar of the branch. The branch collar is a bulge formed at the base of a branch by the annual production of overlapping layers of branch and stem tissues. Sometimes the branch is referred to as the “shoulder”. This type of cut simulates the area where trees would naturally shed their branches. If you cut past the collar, then the protective zone of tissue is removed, making the plant susceptible to fungi and disease. For heavy branches, it is best to make several cuts to relieve some of the stress of the falling branch. This prevents the branch from tearing away from the tree and pulling stem tissue away. For more detailed pruning information, check out the Wild Acres page on [Pruning Trees and Shrubs](#). In addition, Virginia Cooperative Extension has a nice beginner’s guide to [Successful Pruning: Pruning Basics and Tools](#).

What to Prune in Winter

Herbaceous Perennials

After the first hard freeze, you can cut back herbaceous perennials if needed. However, postponing perennial pruning will enhance your backyard wildlife habitat. Different species of insects will overwinter in standing perennial plant stems. In addition, praying mantids like to lay their egg clusters on these stems. So, these stems can be left upright until the early spring when new plants just begin to emerge.



Shrubs

Winter time is a good time to prune several different shrub species. Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*), sweet pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*), dogwoods (*Cornus* spp.), deciduous hollies (*Ilex* spp.), chokeberries (*Photinia* spp.), and sumacs (*Rhus* spp.) all benefit from winter pruning. It should be noted that chokeberries should be pruned in early winter because waiting too long will remove new growth for spring. Roses can also be pruned in the winter, but it is best to wait until February or March. In addition, certain species of hydrangeas require late fall/winter pruning. These include *Hydrangea arborescens* (Annabelle types) and *H. paniculata* (PeeGee types) hydrangeas. These types of hydrangeas bloom on new wood (new stems).

Trees

Several tree species also thrive when pruned in the winter. These species include fruit trees like cherries and apples, oaks (*Quercus* spp.), ashes (*Fraxinus* spp.), arborvitae (*Thuja* spp.), cedars (*Juniperus* spp.), and pines (*Pinus* spp.). Fruit trees are best pruned in late winter. Winter pruning of oaks is essential as cuts emit an odor that attracts beetles associated with oak wilt. However, the beetles are hibernating over the winter.

For a more comprehensive pruning calendar, please consult [Virginia Cooperative Extension's Guide to Successful Pruning Calendar](#).



Want more Habi-chats?: Check out our archives here:
http://www.dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/Habitat/WildAcres/habichat_topics.asp

Backyard Wildlife Fun for Kids: Winter Scavenger Hunt

Just because it is winter doesn't mean you have to be stuck inside! Check out the attached Winter Scavenger Hunt as a fun, family-friendly outdoor activity. ☺ You can either print the document below or [click here](#) for a full scale version.

Winter Scavenger Hunt

Let's go on a winter scavenger hunt! How many items can you find?


 Red Berries


 Evergreen Leaf


 Rough Bark


 Feather


 Smooth Bark


 Old Flowers


 Pine Needles


 Acorn


 Animal Track


 Pinecone



<http://www.dnr.maryland.gov/>

Acknowledgements

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- Hairy woodpecker male by Alan D. Wilson, www.naturespicsonline.com
- Nesting hairy woodpecker by Alan Vernon, Wikimedia Commons
- Downy woodpecker vector by Joanna Woerner, , Integration and Application Network, University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science (ian.umces.edu/imagelibrary/).
- All other photos by Kerry Wixted



We want to hear from you!

Letters, e-mail, photos, drawings, etc!

Kerry Wixted
Maryland Wildlife and Heritage Service
580 Taylor Ave., E-1
Annapolis MD 21401
phone: 410-260-8566
fax: 410-260-8596
NEW e-mail: kerry.wixted@maryland.gov

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