

Spring Housekeeping

By Kim Smith

The genus *Prunus* evokes a multitude of images of picturesque spring flowering and summer fruit-bearing trees. The wands of branches shrouded in five-petal blossoms hold their color high up, while the floor of the garden is carpeted in companionable tulips, jonquils, forget-me-nots, and lily of-the-valley. Falling blossoms swirling like snow sift their fragrant petals through the floral carpet, clinging and scattering along the pathways.

Our apricot tree (*Prunus armeniaca* ‘Harglow’) is in full bloom, and with its ornamental round-headed silhouette and broad, oval leaves, it is a tree of graceful beauty. The sweetly scented pure white flowers issue forth from plump, violet colored sepal-enclosed buds. The two colors of violet and white are visible while the tree is leafless and in bloom and, from a distance, create the illusion of a delicately pale pink flower. We sited our apricot tree at the top of our fragrant path to savor the lilting honey scent of its blossoms.

‘Thundercloud’ (*Prunus cerasifera*) is ready to rain its floral beauty. The sheltering boughs of the flowering plum provide cover for myriad songbirds. There are the comings and goings of the year-round resident Mourning Doves and Cardinals, and this earliest of flowering trees, also provides nectar-rich blossoms for the migrating Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and Baltimore Orioles. Catching a glimpse of a nectaring hummingbird or of the cadmium orange breast of the oriole, juxtaposed against the rose-pink profusion of sweetly scented plum blossoms, I know spring is truly underway. A pair of House Finches is building a nest atop one of the porch pillars, adjacent to the flowering plum. Back and forth they fly, from the plum tree to their construction site. We see them together at the feeder, taking turns adding straw to the nest, and companionably perching side-by-side along the back fence wall. On the other hand, a pair of European Starlings is trying to construct a nest in the wooden gutter—one of the corners of the gutter is in utter disrepair—and I am out in the yard shooting them away with our son’s toy pellet gun. They are truly the one of the most annoyingly persistent pests and can’t even manage to build a proper nest! Under their desired nesting site, in only two days, a pile of straw a foot high fell to the ground. I read that starlings build their nests in the eaves of “unkempt” dwellings. How embarrassing! One decrepit gutter and a pair of mess-making starlings and we now belong in the unkempt category. We will have to find the time to fix that gutter. Even their Latin name is descriptively dreadful—*Sturnus vulgaris*. Starlings transmit an assortment of bacterial diseases to livestock, especially poultry. The presence of starlings where food is prepared and served, an *alfresco* dining area for example, is cause for concern—they transmit salmonella to humans.

As were House Sparrows and Pigeons, European Starlings were introduced to Central Park in 1890. The imagery evoked by Shakespeare’s descriptions of songbirds prompted an over-zealous fanatic, Eugene Schiffelin, to deliberately release eighty starlings in 1890 and another 40 in 1891. Now numbering in the tens of millions, European Starlings compete for food and displace nesting sites of native species, including the Eastern Bluebird. The Eastern Bluebird migrates south for the winter and when they return, the year-round resident European Starling has an established advantage.

Eastern Bluebirds nest in the cavities of old trees with rotting wood. It is possible to create a similar nesting habitat by building a nesting box, constructed of breathable wood, with a small entry hole of one and one half inches, no larger and no smaller. The starlings won’t be able to enter a hole that size, but the sparrows will. Place the nesting box five feet above the ground to

discourage House Sparrows. Bluebirds will nest at that height, but sparrows will not. Bluebirds nest along the woodland edges of meadows and pastures. They like to swoop towards their nest.

Rockport Cub Scouts Den Four and Den Six built the Eastern Bluebird nest boxes in the photos. They used recycled fence rails for the posts. The well-made boxes hinge open to remove unwanted nests of invasive bird species. The Cub Scouts installed approximately fifteen this past weekend at the clean up of the restoration of the Loop Pond Watershed Conservation Area. Eric Hutchins, director of the restoration project, suggests facing the entry hole of a nest box towards the woods; this arrangement is seemingly preferable to the bluebirds.

Early spring is an ideal time of year to wash bird feeders. After periods of wet, freezing rain, followed by warm weather, bacteria and mold can grow on the seed and accumulate in the feeders. Wash the feeders inside and out with warm soapy water and a mild solution of bleach and rinse and dry very well.

Now is the time of year to hang hummingbird feeders. Very little is available in the way of nectar and insects for hungry northward migrating Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. We site our feeders on the outer branches of the flowering fruit trees, in close proximity to a native *Rhododendron catawbiense*, which is next to bloom, and is a preferred hummingbird nectar source. The catawbiense is planted near the native, early blooming scarlet honeysuckle, another favorite. And for good measure, we planted cinnamon ferns in this little corridor, a material of choice for nest building Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, and wild columbine, another nectar attractant. A gardening friend temporarily sets perky plastic red flowers beneath her hummingbird feeders in early spring. With this in mind, we planted vivid 'Red Riding-hood' Greggii tulips at the foot of our fruit trees. The long bills of the hummingbird are designed to extract nectar from trumpet and tubular shaped flowers. Hummingbirds cannot distinguish blue from green and are attracted to scarlet to yellow hues. This year we are adding *Lilium canadense*, another scarlet and gold North American wildflower purportedly appealing to the hummingbirds. I will keep you posted on the results of our attempts at creating a habitat for the hummingbirds.

Endnotes: For more detailed information and instructions on how to build bluebird nesting boxes, visit the website of the North American Bluebird Society at www.nabluebirdsociety.org/.



House Finch



Rockport Cub Scouts Den Four



Rockport Cub Scouts Den Six