

Late Autumn Missives

By Kim Smith

With unseasonably chilly air, treacherous sleet and darkening days, it is hard to believe that winter is not yet here. Driving in our community after dark, I am cheered by homes illuminated with welcoming lights and adorned with holiday greens. Mid-December is an ideal time of year to prune holly trees to make use of the evergreen branches and cinnabar colored fruits. Tie a little bundle of holly stems and a sprig of berries with a holiday bow to decorate a gift; a larger bouquet made from larger cuttings provides a festive centerpiece for the table. When pruning the holly, bear in mind the overall desired shape. Creating a manageable-sized shrub or tree becomes increasingly daunting when left unpruned for any number of years. Done annually, it is a much easier task. In our garden, the holly and winterberry usually hold their fruit well into winter, but not this year. The birds have eaten nearly all the berries, but that's okay—a small price to pay for their chorus of songs.

For the longest time, I couldn't understand why, although our dogwood tree (*Cornus florida* var. *rubra*) bears masses of sublime coral-pink blossoms in spring, it was seemingly fruitless. We subsequently noted that, just as quickly as the fruit ripened, it was devoured by the songbirds. And the same holds true for the star magnolia (*Magnolia stellata*) and Oyama magnolia (*M. sieboldii*).

Absent from our garden are the melodious notes of members of the thrush family. Although we rarely catch a glimpse of any thrush other than the American Robin, the presence of the Hermit and Wood Thrushes was made known by their ethereal flute-like phrases, usually given at dusk and dawn. I would charge out to the garden at the first hint of their music, enjoying their song, but looking in vane. Elusive and shy, they prefer to nest in dense evergreens and the understory of woodlands. Northward migrating Wood Thrushes arrive in Massachusetts by mid-April and depart by mid-November. Within a year of planting successively fruit bearing shrubs and small trees—highbush blueberries, lowbush blueberries, black cherry, elderberries, dogwood, magnolia, Virginia rose, winterberry, holly, and crabapples—the thrushes, catbirds, and mockingbirds took up residence.

Two of our favorite permanent residents at the safflower seed feeder are the Northern Cardinal and Black-capped Chickadee. Winter, spring, summer, and fall, cardinals are first to the feeder in the early morning and the last to depart in the evening. The cardinals *cheer, cheer, cheer* and *sweet, sweet, sweet* are my preferred morning wake-up call. The Black-capped Chickadees visit throughout the day. I have often mentioned this to friends and it is definitely worth repeating: squirrels are not interested in safflower seeds. We keep one feeder filled only with safflower seeds. There are no ugly plastic hoods or mechanized deterrents. Safflower seeds also provide nourishment for the Downy Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse and Red-breasted Nuthatch. The one drawback is that safflower seeds entice pigeons. Occasionally I try to sneak in a handful of black oil sunflower seeds, just to enrich the cardinal's diet, but by days end, the feeder is inundated with squirrels, European Starlings and House Sparrows. The range of the Northern Cardinal, Tufted Titmouse and Northern Mockingbird has expanded dramatically in the past century. In 1929, the Northern Cardinal was described as a "rare" visitor.

The American Goldfinches flock by the dozen to the thistle feeders and they, too, are permanent inhabitants. Thistle feeders are designed specifically with goldfinches in mind. The feeders are narrow cylindrical tubes with little perches and tiny holes that allow only the smaller

beaks of finches and chickadees to access the seed. During the fall and winter months the plumage of both male and female American Goldfinches are a mottled greenish-brown, proving camouflage amidst the drabber seasonal hues. By mid-spring, the adult males have developed their courting colors, advertising themselves in brilliant cadmium yellow. The gentle flock, quietly feeding during the autumn and winter months, suddenly becomes a noisy raucous crowd, loudly proclaiming territory and females. The ripened seed heads of coneflowers, asters, *Verbena bonariensis*, and sunflowers left on the stalk also provide nourishment for the songbirds. The thistle seed that falls to the ground directly beneath the feeders entices the Mourning Doves, another year-round dweller. Indelibly etched in my mind is the cooing of the doves, just one of the many beautiful songs I associate with my grandparent's summer home, overlooking Cape Cod Bay, and surrounded by marsh and meadow.

Despite the fact that our small lot is less than a quarter acre, at last count we had planted over sixteen small flowering and fruiting trees and a multitude of shrubs, all providing protective cover and nourishment for hosts of songbirds. I encourage everyone to plant a tree-garden. The winterscape of beauty in bare limbs and choristers attracted brings full circle four seasons of grace in our gardens.



American Goldfinch and Black-capped Chickadee



Northern Cardinal Fledgling