

# Birds and garden berries

Mike Toms

There is a good chance that you have berry-producing trees and shrubs in your garden, perhaps established to provide autumn colour or to attract visiting birds. In my own garden it is the rowan tree and ivy that generate the most interest from visiting thrushes, blackbirds and wood pigeons, but in your garden it could be *Cotoneaster bullatus*, berberis or even Duke of Argyll's tea-plant, *Lycium barbarum*. Berries are a device used by some plants to disperse their seeds, the provision of a nutritious pulp around the seeds makes them attractive to birds and mammals alike. The seeds have tough external coats that protect them from the bird's digestive system, allowing them to be deposited elsewhere once they have passed through the gut.

Different plant species compete for seed dispersers and advertise the attractiveness of their berries through colour. For example, berries rich in anthocyanins (well known anti-oxidants) are black, or ultra-violet reflecting, and this colouration has been shown to provide an honest signal of the nutritional rewards on offer. Other berries are red, orange, pink or even white, but take a look around the countryside this winter and you will see that most berries are either red or black. It is only in gardens that you see pinks, whites and yellows. Since birds are likely to take red or black berries first, you may find that your orange or yellow-berried *Sorbus aucuparia* var. *xanthocarpa* retains its berries until late in the winter.

Understanding which berries are available throughout the winter, and which are taken preferentially by birds is key to knowing the best berry-producing shrubs to plant in our



gardens. Planting a mix of shrubs whose berries become available at different times may be one way to ensure a succession of avian visitors throughout the winter. For example, while the bird cherry, *Prunus padus*, produces fruit early in the season, rowan and blackthorn fruit a little later and *Viburnum opulus* and ivy later still. Another factor to consider is the feeding preferences of the birds themselves, not just in terms of berry colour, but also berry size. Song thrush and redwing, for example, find rosehips difficult to handle, so may preferentially feed on haws. As responsible gardeners, we also have to consider our role in the establishment of invasive non-native species. They may form fruit at different times from native ones and might, as a consequence, prove particularly attractive to birds who then disperse the seed across the wider countryside.

It is important to understand how birds use berries to identify their preferences and to examine the extent to which birds take non-native fruits. The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) is running a study this winter (the Birds and Garden Berries Study) and they would welcome your help. A free survey pack is available from Birds and Garden Berries Study, BTYO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU or email [gbw@bto.org](mailto:gbw@bto.org). The study aims to

address some key questions about birds and berries, allowing better advice to be provided to gardeners keen to use berry-producing plants within their gardens.



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