



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Fuchsias, hummingbirds, and more.

I seem to have come full circle and find myself collecting fuchsias again.

The very first garden that I planted (age 13 or so) included a lot of fuchsias. In the coastal Southern California climate, these were easy landscape and garden basics: shrubs that bloomed for many months of the year, drawing hummingbirds. Some got quite sizable. Of all the plants I left behind when I moved into the Sacramento Valley, they were the ones I knew I'd miss the most.

I did find one species that was considered hardy here, and planted it in the mid 1980's. My *Fuchsia magellanica* is now about 6 feet tall and 8 feet across, putting on great waves of small, delicate-looking blossoms in red and purple from spring through fall. Hummingbirds visit the plant regularly.

My mother used to use the phrase "been through Hell and high water," and it certainly applies to this fuchsia. Summer heat waves, periodic floods and droughts? No problem. Even the freezes of 1990 and 1998 defoliated it, but it promptly resprouted.

Fuchsias just weren't considered hardy here, and everyone said most couldn't take the Valley heat. A popular fuchsia nursery on the Mendocino Coast, charmingly named Fuchsiarama, kept a list of "heat-tolerant" fuchsias for those of us who visited from the interior.

Shortly after I moved here a horrible mite, the fuchsia gall mite, decimated plantings all up and down the coast. Apparently, just knowing the history of this mite is a sign of age: "Some older gardeners may remember the days when fuchsias were free of this tiny pest."¹ Yep.

Fuchsias pretty much disappeared from coastal gardens in California. They used to reseed freely in the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens in Fort Bragg, and they're virtually all gone there. Nothing really kills this tiny mite, and it so disfigures the plants that people simply stopped growing them.

Meanwhile, I kept planting fuchsias now and then and finding them surprisingly easy to grow under certain conditions.

Happily, the fuchsia gall mite doesn't seem to be able to establish inland. Coastal growers started swapping lists of resistant varieties, those that weren't too badly disfigured by this new pest in the 1980's. Without bothering to check, I've planted species that are described as highly susceptible, including the aforementioned *F. magellanica*. Perhaps it's due to geographic isolation, or the significant reduction in the number of host plants anywhere, or just luck, but I have yet to see gall mite on my plants. My guess is they can't overwinter here.

What fuchsias want

My experience is that so long as you give them bright shade and grow them in garden beds or in very large pots, then you just need to make sure they get plenty of water. The main problem I've observed is that people try to grow them in hanging baskets. Keeping those watered is

¹ http://ceventura.ucanr.edu/Gardening/Coastal/Landscape_578/Pests/Fuchsia_Gall_Mite/



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nearly impossible in our hot, dry climate. There's simply not enough root space and they dry out too fast. Nobody really wants to grow something that needs water twice a day. So, I put them in half wine-barrels in the shade of my sycamore tree, commingling fuchsias with ferns and caladiums, and coleus and other summer annuals. Unlike that stalwart *magellanica*, fuchsias do freeze back to some degree each winter, about the same way *lantana* does. That is: some years they freeze to the ground, other years they just get partially top-killed. But they always re-sprout, and bloom even better in the second year and thereafter. Just wait until spring when they've started to grow, cut back the damaged portions, and perhaps renew the soil by mulching or repotting them. Now I have about a dozen scattered in planters along my long driveway, flanked by *Abutilon* and other flowers intended to draw hummingbirds. It's sort of a hummer freeway, and they do make good use of it.

A garden for birds in South Davis

Robert and Carli Traverso are avid bird watchers, and in between their travels to see birds in exotic locales, Robert has created an amazing garden designed to draw them in. I had a chance to visit his garden earlier this summer. He's mastered the basics for hummingbirds: lots of bright flowers with something blooming every season, plenty of red flowers (more on that in a moment), a mix of sun and shade, some water nearby, and places for them to stop and rest. Apparently, nobody told Robert Traverso that fuchsias are difficult to grow here, which is fortunate. The very first thing you see as you arrive is a long hedge of a variety of fuchsia called *Gartenmeister Bonstedt*, sometimes called the firecracker fuchsia. When I visited his garden earlier this summer, they were in full bloom.

Begonias have been a special favorite in Traverso's garden. He has regular bedding (fibrous) begonias in a number of places, as well as the newer hybrids such as *Dragon Wings* which get taller and have bright pink, orange, or red flowers over a long season. Begonias are a very diverse group of tropical to subtropical plants. Most are tender, but some overwinter here, and both of his types do.

Which colors do they like?

You will frequently read that hummingbirds prefer a particular color (usually red) over other flower colors, or to look for tubular flower shape. There have been a number of preference studies done on hummingbirds, some captive and some simply observed in the wild. The results were all over the place. In one study² of three colors of monkeyflowers, hummingbirds strongly preferred orange, then red, and avoided yellow. Bumblebee preference was the opposite. Many have observed that hummingbirds are especially attracted to tubular flowers but will visit almost anything that is blooming. The first flowers that drew them onto my property were sunflowers, which are tiny tubular flowers in a large inflorescence, at which they would spend long moments moving from one to the other.

² <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/gbn/vol52/iss2/5/>



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An extensive study³ of preference for sugars, sugar solution, and flower color found that the taste preference was for sucrose over glucose over fructose, and at higher concentrations, and there was a preference for flowers with “high nectar flow.” The author also found that, once captured, the birds continued to visit color solutions similar to the color of flowers they’d been feeding on in the wild beforehand.

Bottom line from this study: “the primary requisite for the color of a hummingbird flower is that it be conspicuous to the birds, to advertise the nectar.” White, yellow, pink, and orange will work just fine so long as they stand out.

Really, the key seems to be to have an abundance of flowers all year around, which Robert has achieved by filling nearly every square foot of the property with flowering plants in garden beds and containers, all watered with drip irrigation and carefully chosen for the range of sun and shade and a long season of bloom. The shade arbor, water features, and stone patio in the back make you want to sit quietly and watch the wildlife. It’s like a giant bouquet in a tranquil grotto.

Which plants to use?

In the summer and fall, perennials and flowering shrubs in Traverso’s garden that attract them include: Abutilon, Callistemon (bottlebrush), Cuphea, Epilobium (our native California fuchsia, formerly named Zauschneria), Hesperaloe, Lantana, and any of the many forms of Salvia (ornamental sages).

Anna’s hummingbird is resident here in the Central Valley in winter, so his flowering shrubs that sustain them then include: Arbutus, Camellias, Daphne, manzanita, and especially Ribes, a genus of ornamental shrubs which includes California native as well as European species of currants and gooseberries.

I would add Grevilleas to this list. On my property they provide winter sustenance as well as nesting sites for hummingbirds. Winter-blooming aloes and red-hot poker also attract them. Spring flowers in Robert’s garden include coral bells, dianthus, digiplexis, and snapdragons.

Other benefits and features

Nectar is important to hummingbirds, but they also feed on arthropods: insects and spiders. Based on observations as well as examination of the stomach contents⁴ (fun job, eh?) of hummingbirds, it’s evident that much of the behavior you see as they’re darting around involves fly-catching, snatching spiders or their prey from webs, or picking insects off of leaves.

The water features that dominate his back yard are important parts of the habitat for birds of all kinds. Robert re-purposed an old wine barrel that his father had used, a very solid piece that is now a gently overflowing fountain thanks to a recirculating pump.

Hummingbirds as well as dragonflies like to perch near water sources. And other birds as well: while we were there, a robin kept careful watch from a nearby fence, waiting for us to clear out

³ Taste Preferences, Color Preferences, and Flower Choice in Hummingbirds, F. Gary Stiles, The Condor, Vol. 78, No. 1 (Spring, 1976), pp. 10-26

⁴ <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/not-all-sweetness-and-light-the-real-diet-of-hummingbirds/>



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so it could bathe. Larger birds are important predators of bugs in the garden such as leaf-footed bugs and stinkbugs, and dragonflies eat whiteflies. A simple water feature in your yard can help reduce your pest problems.

The plant selection was mostly done by the owner; the landscape water and stone features were installed by landscape contractor John Rensing.



http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_hummingbirds/Hummingbird%20on%20epilobium%20by%20J%20Eisen.jpg

Anna's hummingbird feeding at a flower of California fuchsia (Epilobium) in the UC Davis Arboretum. This native perennial flower is a drought tolerant, easy perennial for sun or light shade. Photo by Jonathan Eisen, used with permission.



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Fuchsias:

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_hummingbirds/Fuchsia%20Gartenmeister%20full%20bloom.jpg

Established shrub of Fuchsia Gartenmeister Bonstedt, sometimes called the firecracker fuchsia, in full bloom. Hummingbirds are very attracted to the tubular, orange-red flowers. This variety is easy to grow, winter hardy and features an especially long season of bloom.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_hummingbirds/Fuchsia%20Gartenmeister%20hedge.jpg

Fuchsia Gartenmeister Bonstedt, growing as a low hedge. The plants survive the winter with slight frost damage, resprouting with the first warm weather.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_hummingbirds/Fuchsia%20hybrid.jpg

A compact-growing fuchsia hybrid thriving and blooming in partial shade in our area. I recommend using large containers so there's plenty of soil. That will make it easier to keep it watered here. They will bloom all summer.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_hummingbirds/Fuchsia%20magellanica.jpg

It's hard to find in garden centers, but *Fuchsia magellanica* is one of the hardiest species for this area. A large, sprawling shrub to several feet across. Blooms spring through fall, and very attractive to hummingbirds.



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Abutilons:

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_hummingbirds/Abutilon%20Strybing%20Red.jpg

Abutilons, commonly called flowering maples, are actually flowering shrubs in the mallow family, more closely related to hibiscus. They bloom here all summer and are very attractive to hummingbirds. This variety called Strybing Red is an especially abundant bloomer. The plant grows to about 5' tall and will sprawl happily if you let it. Hummingbirds are very attracted to abutilons.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_hummingbirds/Abutilon%20Tiger%20Eye.jpg

Tiger Eye is one of the bigger abutilon varieties for this area. The striking striped flowers come in waves of dozens at a time on a plant that can get ten feet tall and wide if you let it. Prune or stake it if you prefer. Hummingbirds are very attracted to abutilons.



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Begonias:

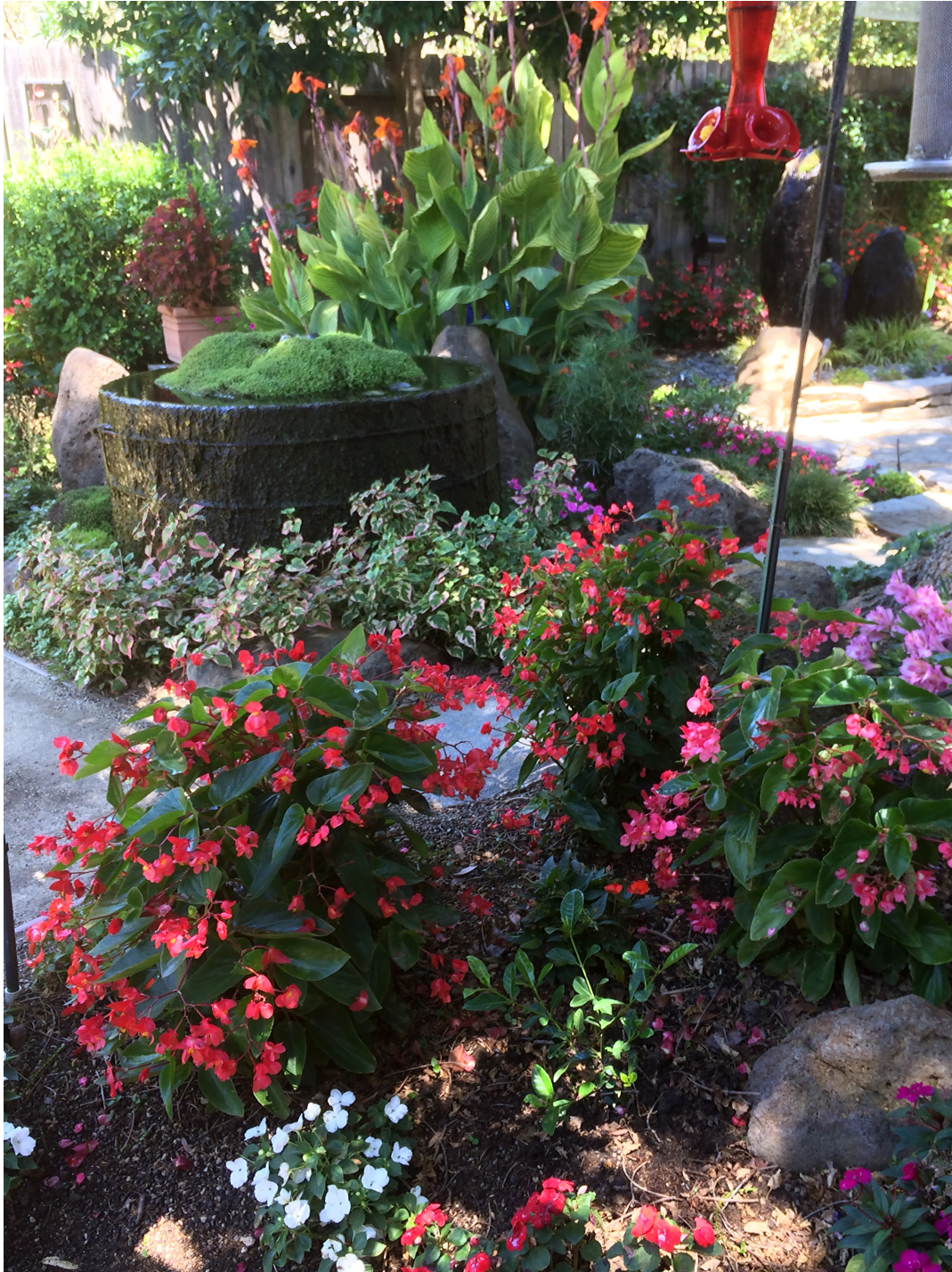
http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_hummingbirds/begonia.JPG

Lots of bright orange-red blooms all through spring and summer are the main features of the Dragon Wing begonias. They're hardy enough to survive our winters, resprouting from the frosted tops and beginning to bloom again by May. Hummingbirds love begonias of all types.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_hummingbirds/Dragonwing%20begonias%20with%20water%20feature.jpg

Dragon Wing begonias provide lots of color in this South Davis back yard. They're hardy enough to survive our winters, resprouting from the frosted tops and beginning to bloom again by May. The water features draw birds and dragonflies and the bright-flowered cannas have great leaf texture. Canna flowers also attract hummingbirds.



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Water feature:

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_hummingbirds/Traverso%20back%20yard.jpg

Water feature with a backdrop of canna lilies in a South Davis back yard designed for birds. The water features draw birds and dragonflies and the bright-flowered cannas have great leaf texture. Canna flowers also attract hummingbirds.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_hummingbirds/Robin%20on%20fence.jpg

Robin patiently waiting to use the fountain as a bath.