

Attracting cardinals

Cardinals are the true showstoppers of nature. Whenever one of these bright birds enters the landscape it seems that everything else stops—and our eyes marvel at its radiant beauty. Absolutely special!

Male cardinals are famous for their brilliant red feathers and crested heads. The beauty of female cardinals is more subtle yet just as special, as their feathers have a rose-colored tinge.

Cardinals are southern birds, but gradually their range has extended northward. This extension to the north has clearly been aided by families providing food in feeder boxes during winter.

Cardinals are not shy about taking food from a feeder. They are usually the first birds to feed in the morning and the last ones to feed at dusk.

Cardinals love to sing. During midday, listen for the soft songs of the female cardinal. These songs are repeated more resoundingly by her mate. If she changes her tune, her mate will follow with the same, new



melody. Sometimes you may even hear the birds serenading each other at the same time.

At the feeder, male cardinals often fight off other birds (even their own mates) for seed. But the possessive male cardinal will inevitably relent and allow other birds to feed.

It is interesting that as the breeding season approaches in March, the domineering mood of the male cardinal changes toward its mate. In fact, you may see the male cardinal in the late winter shuck seeds out of sunflower shells for its mate, and then feed her as she lowers her head back to receive the seed (see photo), much like baby birds do when fed by their parents.

As for feeding strategies, cardinals prefer to be fed from feeders that are raised above the ground. They like to have their feet on something sturdy when they eat and they do not like hanging feeders because of their unsteadiness.

Cardinals love sunflower seeds, especially the black, oil-type seeds. They will sometimes scratch their way through an entire seed mix to get every sunflower seed before eating other seeds. Cardinals also like safflower seeds and white proso millet.

Cardinals do not migrate. Although they tend to wander in the winter, seldom do they fly more than a few miles from their nest. Since cardinals do not migrate, the planting of an inviting landscape can attract a cardinal family to your yard for many years.

Cardinals prefer to nest in shrubbery and low trees that face open ground. They are attracted to landscape plants that are useful both for food and for nesting. Such plants include hawthorn, viburnum, raspberry, elderberry, cherry, dogwood, and sumac. DG

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