

Have a Hummingbird Garden in Winter

By Brad Wier, SAWS Gardenstyle San Antonio

When our south Texas summer perennials slow down and drop flowers in autumn, we tend to stow away the hummingbird feeders for the season. But if your winter garden is bursting with hardy perennials, you won't miss the arrival of some of the feistiest and freakiest hummingbirds of the year.

The green-and-red Rufous hummingbird, for instance, is perfectly attired in Christmas elf colors, and chatters like a gremlin on the attack. The Calliope hummingbird spends its summers in Colorado, but brings its bizarre halo of purple streamers to local gardens for winter, sneaking around in low places and providing living color on cold brown days.



By November, these migrants are just beginning to show up in South Texas, where they'll take over the yard and stay all season long if they can find the right plants — and if they don't get too startled by New Year's fireworks.

You see, hummingbirds from Alaska, the Pacific Northwest and Canada have the ability to endure what for us would be extremely cold temperatures at night, dropping their body temperatures and heart rates to conserve energy and enter a state similar to hibernation. By the time the sun rises, they're ready to warm up and refill in a hurry, putting on a show in the wildscape.

That's because with their mountain-top egos, they can be even louder and more aggressive than summer hummingbirds, chasing off squirrels, other birds, mail carriers and even hawks. When they can't find flowers or feeders, they devour insects — a quick protein source abundant even in the leafless landscape.

So if you're looking to add some feisty reds and purples to your winter garden, you can hardly go wrong with hummingbirds. As always, they're looking for loads of tubeflowers, all the time, because they need to fill up constantly just to get through the day. The result: any local nursery's list of hummingbird plants will include some of the toughest landscape plants, thriving in the most extreme conditions. And, if hummingbirds recommend it, you'll probably like it too.

For the winter garden (in addition to the usual salvias, Turk's Caps and bougainvilleas) don't forget forsythia sage, Mexican honeysuckle, firecracker plant and shrimp plant. As a bonus, hardy winter perennials typically thrive without additional water, so you can enjoy the show without having to drag hoses around.