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Birds in Gardens

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The behaviour of birds (both kinds) may be likened, I sometimes think, to the peace of God: it passeth all understanding. For centuries men have been making the mistake of trying to understand women, not appreciating that women neither need nor want to be understood, merely to be loved. In much the same way we gardeners are now trying to understand birds, their apparently fickle nature and what makes them mischievously ravage so many of the plants we love.

I am prompted to these observations by a recent article by Mr Roy Hay, who had received and dealt with an extensive pile of correspondence on the subject of why birds attack certain flowers not only without apparent reason but also apparently out of heartless ingratitude for the food that gardeners put out for them in winter. The greater part of Mr Hay's correspondents were firm in the conclusion that the more food you put out for birds the more they will attack your plants, and with this view, very reluctantly, Mr Hay agreed.

For my part I do not agree. It is my firm conviction, based on something like forty years of gardening, that the behaviour of birds in gardens is wholly illogical – that is from the human point of view. It is also my experience that the apparently mischievous and fickle behaviour of birds towards certain flowers tends to go in cycles. Whether you feed birds or not there is no atom of consistency in what they will do to your plants as soon as your back is turned.

There can be few gardeners who have not suffered painful and infuriating experiences of this kind. I give now a few of my own. For many years my forsythia, ignored by birds, was a ravishing sight. Suddenly birds decided this wouldn't do at all and began to ravage it unmercifully, so that for ten years not a single bud was allowed to blossom. Now, with equal and inexplicable suddenness, they ignore it again, so that once more it blossoms splendidly. So with polyanthus: unmolested for years, they were suddenly mercilessly attacked. The cure, wholly successful for several

seasons, was black cotton. Then, last year, even that failed to deter. In desperation I resorted to ginger. It worked. This year black cotton is again the successful protector.

I had for many years a bush of that most bewitching of viburnums, the richly scented *V. carlesii*, and another of *V. burkwoodii*. Suddenly, and for a period of five years, every bud on the two bushes dropped before opening. The cause, I was told by a horticulturist far more experienced than I, was unknown. Moreover the disease, as disease it evidently was, was spreading everywhere, even to Wisley. I despaired. Then one day I appealed – Wisley having given little comfort in its advice – to another expert. His answer was simple: birds. Again it was black cotton to the rescue and now the viburnums again bloom happily, drenching the spring air with that incomparable fragrance of theirs. Precisely the same thing happened with my wisterias and again the same cure worked.

Aubrieta, over many years, flourished unmolested. Now birds have decided that it makes delightful nesting material and heartlessly pull it to pieces. Last year a pair of missel-thrushes, which as a boy I called screaming thrushes, decided that the silver foliage of *Centaurea gymnocarpa* would serve the same purpose. They moved into attack on a May morning. I replied with a pair of barn cloches, thinking that the flash of glass in the sun would be an adequate scare. Not so; I had neglected to close the cloche ends and the thrushes seemed to find it even greater fun to hop into the little glass house and fetch out the silver wallpaper for their new home. The cloche ends having eventually been put on, the birds, infinitely puzzled, came back almost to sneer through the glass, as if much chagrined by the mean behaviour of the wretched fellow who had put it there.

There were springs when crocuses were lugged to pieces. It never happens now. The birds apparently like young lettuces better. But sometimes forget-me-nots also make tempting nesting material, though I confess that it is not an unpretty sight to see a goldfinch flicking delicately through the air with a bright blue sprig of flower in its beak.

Constantly we ask ourselves *why* do they do it? I also constantly ask myself another question: why, suddenly, and for no apparent reason, do birds of one kind or another desert a garden? I am

thinking of chaffinches – ‘pinks’ I used to call them as a boy. I read somewhere, only the other day, that the chaffinch is Britain’s commonest bird. So it used to be in my garden, some pairs being so tame that they would come and eat cake out of your hand on a summer afternoon. Now, with us, the chaffinch has become a rare bird, so that I get into a state of positive excitement when I see one shyly picking up breakfast crumbs among the hordes of starlings, sparrows, tits, robins, blackbirds and thrushes that busily congregate by the kitchen door. Why, oh! why has the chaffinch thus deserted us?

Yet who am I to complain? In the wretched, protracted winter of 1969–70 I suppose we put out more food for birds than ever before. Result? Contrary to the theories of Mr Hay and his correspondents the birds have responded by behaving impeccably. Not a bud of forsythia, wisteria or viburnum has been touched, not a head of polyanthus, not one goblet of crocus.

It doesn’t make sense? Of course it doesn’t make sense. Birds, of whatever sort, aren’t supposed to make sense. For that reason we say that we don’t understand them; but my own theory is that we should simply say to them (both kinds of course) ‘for all thy faults we love thee still’.

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