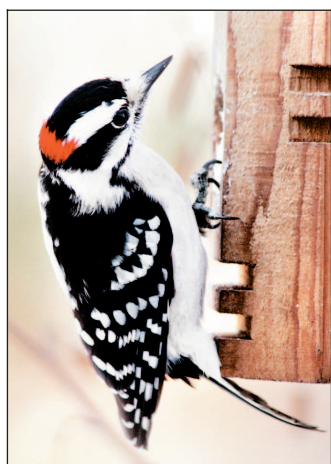


Bird's-eye views



Four more examples from Claire Dassy: female cardinal, clockwise from top left, goldfinch, male downy woodpecker and ruby throated hummingbird. PHOTOS BY CLAIRE DASSY



He likens the backyard to a personal studio where “eye-catching, close-up bird photography is possible without extravagant equipment.”

The golden rule of bird photography, he says, is to make sure the sun is at your back. “That gives you the most light, so every feather and every crease of the bird is lit up,” says McElroy, whose work can be found in plenty of birding magazines, even the field guide of the American Museum of Natural History, published last year.

His corollary to the sunlight rule: “Once your shadow is shorter than you are tall, it’s time to come in,” McElroy adds, explaining that in winter, you’ll have good light till about noon, but come late spring and summer, you’ll need to put away the lens by 9 in the morning, when the light grows harsh.

Most bird photographers prefer morning to evening light, simply because birds

Perch here for inspiration

The book considered the bible of bird photography is “Art of Bird Photography: The Complete Guide to Professional Field Techniques” (Amphoto Books, \$24.95), by Arthur Morris.

And here are a few great bird sites to inspire you:

■ Claire Dassy’s quietnature.com

■ Garth McElroy’s featheredfotos.com

■ Brian Tang’s flickr.com/photos/hard-rain:

Tang works nights in a steel mill in northwest Indiana, and when he emerges in the morning, he makes a habit of stopping at nature preserves between the mill and his Plainfield home. A longtime nature enthusiast without a single feeder in his backyard, he happens to take some of the finest bird photos around.

— B.M.

are busier at dawn, when the long night’s hunger has them flitting about for seed.

One nifty trick of McElroy’s is that when he is out shooting the birds, he takes down all but one of his backyard feeders.

“This creates a waiting line for the feeder and forces birds to perch and wait,” he says.

And for those who want to frame the birds, that up-close platform holds the key to what’s soulful about birding, framed or otherwise.

“I think they just show us something about life,” says Dassy, unabashed in her love for birds, “the way they spend time looking for just the right seed, the way they build their nests.”

If she could, she would spend her whole day perched on that deck of hers, waiting for her

little friends to teach her all they know — and hop before her lens.

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Another thing we love

Korean spice viburnum: It wraps you in its heaven scent and won’t let you go for the few short days in spring when it unfurls its magic. — *Barbara Mahany*



Jump-starting the garden

February is the time of year I start thinking about my vegetable garden.



Sean Conway
Cultivating Life

Early in the month I complete my seed orders, and toward the end of the month I begin drawing a plan for the garden on paper. Mapping out the garden ahead of time helps me optimize my use of space and plan successive plantings. Space allocated to early-season cool-weather crops will be used for warmth-loving

plants later on. It also gives me the opportunity to rotate placement of plants from the previous year, to avoid harmful plant-specific pathogens from building up in the soil.

Like many gardeners, I get a jump on the planting season by starting seed early. Sowing seed indoors is inexpensive and easy, and it provides an opportunity to grow a wider variety of vegetables, especially those that require a long growing season.

Seed catalogs are an excellent reference source. In addition to the information usually found on the seed packets themselves, catalogs often provide information on specific germination requirements, bloom time, cultural requirements and number of days to maturity.

This information can be very helpful when deciding which seed to start indoors, and when. The correct timing of seed sowing is critical to success. During the cold winter months, the desire to start gardening has led many a gardener to sow seeds too early. Unless grown in a greenhouse with proper temperatures and light levels, most seedlings kept indoors too long will not thrive in the garden.



TMS PHOTO

Sowing seeds indoors lets you choose from a greater variety of plants.

Getting started

What you'll need

- Clean containers with excellent drainage: Choose any container that is at least 2 inches deep. Your local garden center or DIY store will have several options, as well as seed-starting kits. Recycled plastic pots from the previous garden season will work, too, provided they are clean and disinfected.
- Sterile, freely draining potting medium; this is important to prevent fungal diseases that can cause young seedlings to die shortly after germination.
- Fluorescent lights with proper spectrum bulbs (aka grow lights).
- A location with correct temperature and adequate ventilation.

Steps to take

1 Fill containers with premoistened starting mix to within ¼ inch from top of container. Use just enough water to dampen mix; it should not be soggy. Tamp down containers to level the soil and to remove large air spaces.

2 Follow directions on seed packet for depth of planting. Usually, very small seed is sown on top of the soil then misted with a fine spray of water, while larger seed may need to be covered with a fine layer of soil.

3 Place the containers in bright natural light, and keep the soil evenly moist. Placing the container inside an unsealed clear plastic bag will help keep humidity levels high and prevent the soil from drying out.

4 Once the seeds germinate, remove the plastic bag and move them under the fluorescent lights 16 to 18 hours a day. Keep the lights about 6 to 8 inches above the plants; lights kept farther away will result in leggy seedlings. Grow your seedlings in temperatures close to 70 degrees during the day and, if possible, close to 60 at night. This will help keep the plants compact and encourage strong growth.

5 Begin feeding your seedlings with a well-balanced water-soluble fertilizer at about one-quarter the strength recommended; apply about every third or fourth time you water.

6 As the seedlings grow, raise the lights to maintain the 6- to 8-inch distance. Once the seedlings have at least two sets of leaves, transplant them into individual pots or cell packs.

Sean Conway is host of the TV show “Cultivating Life,” which airs on CLTV at 1 p.m. and 5 p.m. Sundays. His Web site is cultivatinglife.com

— Tribune Media Services