

Urban Birds

by Jessie Byrd, MLA, ASLA, Desert Green Design, and Kendall Kroesen, Restoration Program Manager

Beebrush, or whitebrush (*Aloysia gratissima*) is native to parts of Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. This is a wonderful plant for bird gardens. A member of the verbena family, beebrush matures quickly and can reach a little over head-height. It has bunches of delicate, white flowers that emit a clean and sweet fragrance that attracts bees.

Before you recoil at the thought of an insect-attracting flower, remember there are lots of native bees as well as our imported varieties. It's great to support native pollinators, many of which have declined precipitously. The greater the variety of insects you have around your yard the healthier the ecosystem will be. Generally speaking, hosting insects in your landscape helps support populations of some of the insectivorous birds such as flycatchers.

But beebrush does not just attract bees. It is very attractive to goldfinches and house finches. It is like planting a self-filling thistleseed feeder! Whole flocks will perch among the branches, having a snack.

Planting species like beebrush is a step toward sustainable urban habitat. Hanging a bird feeder, though it can be very entertaining, is like hanging a unit of blood for a critically ill patient. It can temporarily keep the patient alive, but having plants in your garden that sustain wildlife is a step toward healing the patient!

Beebrush has a very long blooming period. It will start to bloom as soon as the weather is warm, and bloom through the summer well into the fall!

The leaves are tiny, so when they drop during cold weather, the leaf litter can stay under the shrub without looking messy. The branching structure is delicate, with lots of small branches that provide great cover for birds. It's not dense enough to provide much of a screen, but it would be a great background plant. Beebrush is a prolific self-seeder, so it's great for gardens with wild patterns, but not formal spaces.



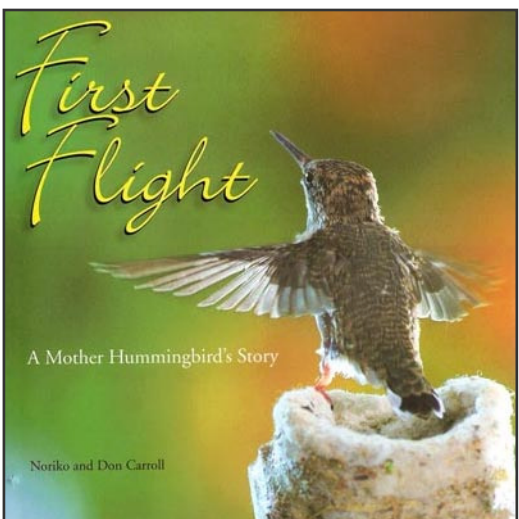
LEFT Beebrush, *Aloysia gratissima*. RIGHT Closeup of *A. gratissima* in Jessie Byrd's yard. Photos courtesy Kendall Kroesen.

Beebrush needs very little water and loves full sun! Once established, it should not need frequent watering. If your landscape harvests and infiltrates rainwater, this and other drought-tolerant plants will thrive.

Another closely related member of this genus is Wright's beebush (*Aloysia wrightii*). This species is native to the foothills of local Tucson-area mountains. It does not seem to attract birds so prolifically, but it hosts bees and some other insects. Though a bit smaller, it is somewhat similar in appearance to *Aloysia gratissima* with small leaves and flowers, and a delicate appearance. Also going by the name *oreganillo*, it has the advantage that its leaves can substitute for oregano as a cooking herb.

Plant for the birds!

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Book Review by Bobbie Lambert, Tucson Audubon Shop volunteer and Arizona Sonora Desert Museum docent.

First Flight: A Mother Hummingbird's Story by Noriko and Don Carroll

This is a delightful non-scientific story and photo journal of a mother hummingbird's nest on the authors' patio clothesline at their home near Las Vegas, Nevada. They were inspired to set up a camera and create a photographic record of her nest repairs, egg laying, hatchlings, nestlings and, finally, to her two fully fledged, young Black-chinned Hummingbirds.

The Carrolls have done a bit of anthropomorphizing, but the information about the natural history of hummingbirds is accurate and thorough. This would be an excellent book to introduce children or non-birding adults to the life of a hummingbird.

Retail Price: \$14.95