



Gardeners Helping Gardeners Succeed

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All About Feeding Birds

Attracting birds into your yard is remarkably easy if certain needs are met. Birds need food, water, shelter from predators, and places to raise their young. To get birds to flock to your yard, provide them with the food that they love, and plant the types of plants in your yard that creates an attractive habitat.

Offering a variety of foods in the proper setting and you will attract the most birds throughout the year. There are four things that attract the most birds:

- A. A hanging feeder with sunflower seed
- B. A ground or tray-type feeder with cracked corn and mixed seed
- C. Suet feeder
- D. Water.

Early fall is the best time to begin feeding birds, as they are searching for reliable food supplies and will remain in the area where food is found. Once you begin feeding birds, do not abruptly stop in the winter. If you must stop, gradually taper off your feeding so that the birds have time to find another feeding source.

Bird Seed

First and foremost purchase quality seed. Look for clean, glossy, plump, dry seed with no insect damage. Any rancid seed will smell bad.

Sunflower seed is the first choice of most songbirds. There are three kinds of sunflower seeds available: black oil, grey-striped, and hulled. The black oil sunflower is the preferred type of most seed-eating birds. It has a thinner shell that is easier for small birds to remove and has more oil for its weight. Hulled sunflower seed, although more expensive, has the advantage of little or no clean up under the feeder.

Birds attracted to Sunflower feeders: Mountain chickadee, white-breasted nuthatch, American goldfinch, house finch, pine siskin, downy woodpecker, hairy woodpecker, Northern flicker, Black-headed grosbeak, White-crowned sparrow, and scrub jay.

Ground Feeding with mixed seed

An advantage to this type of feeding is that you do not need a feeder to feed birds, because you can sprinkle the seed directly on the ground. The area should have a ground cover nearby to allow the birds to dive into if a predator appears.

There are many mixtures of commercial bird seed available, which may contain safflower seed, millet, cracked corn, peanut hearts or fruit. Try the different mixes to see which one appeals the most to the birds living in your area.

Keeping your feeders clean is important. If seed is not eaten within several days, clean it up. Put out only the amount the birds eat up quickly. Clean your feeder with a solution of 4 parts water to 1 part bleach to sterilize. Let the feeder dry thoroughly before refilling to prevent mold.

Birds attracted by ground feeders: chickadees, juncos, goldfinches, finches, jays, sparrows, and towhees.

Suet

Suet is a high-energy food source for birds and is a favorite of woodpeckers. This type of feeder can be made by the homeowner by buying suet and placing it into a container that the birds can easily fly to. In the winter you can purchase beef suet from your supermarket meat counter. During the hot summer months use commercially available suet cakes which are harder and will not melt. If you wish to create your own suet cakes you can heat the beef suet from the grocery store, by cutting it into small cubes, melt it in a small pan with a small amount of water, and pouring it into muffin tins until cool. Adding mixed seeds, chopped nuts, or other ingredients can add to the appeal.

Commercially available wire cages are often used to hang the suet from trees or attach to the tree trunk. Many homeowners will also use an onion mesh bag left over from their onion purchase to place the suet in. Another option is to take a left-over log from a tree and drill 1 inch holes around the log and press cold suet into the holes. The birds like this option as it mimics their natural environment and allows larger birds to use their tails for balance.

Birds attracted by suet: Downy woodpecker, hairy woodpecker, black-capped chickadee, white-breasted nuthatch, and northern flicker.

Water

All birds need water for both drinking and bathing. If you provide water you will attract other species of birds into your yard. Water can be placed in many places in your yard, however it is always a good to place it near your feeders. Perches near the water will make the site more desirable to the birds. Running water will attract more birds. Birdbaths can be outfitted with a fountain, dripper or mister.

Birds need water all year round. In many cold climates birds will eat snow. Water is critical in the hot months to prevent heat stress. The birds also use the water to bath and clean themselves. Bathing helps to prevent many diseases to which birds are susceptible and prevent mites and lice.

Remember that water sources do not need to be elaborate. Whether using a birdbath or a natural water garden, keep it clean.