

Feed Those Backyard Birds (published 12-21-2024)

By Chris Ramsey, Sullivan County Extension Agent III/County Director (retired)

With the cold dreary days, we often find ourselves looking for new projects to occupy our time. If you're looking for a new project, you might consider feeding birds. Birds are attracted to feeders in the winter because other foods are difficult to find, especially in a year with drought. Feeding birds will also offer you an opportunity to watch them if you place the feeders correctly.

Dr. Craig Harper, UT Extension Wildlife Specialist, says you can cater to several different species by knowing the type of feeder and seed (or other food) that different birds prefer. For example, a tube-type or cylindrical feeder may be used to offer thistle seed to goldfinches and pine siskins. If you're not trying to attract a particular species, a fly-through feeder could be used, which will accommodate most bird species. Different seeds and other types of food may be offered to attract specific birds.

For example, mourning doves love black oil-type sunflower seeds and white proso millet. If you want to attract cardinals, they'll flock to any type of sunflower seed, cracked corn, and shelled, broken peanuts. Mockingbirds, brown thrashers, robins, thrushes and catbirds are a little picky. They like cut apples, oranges, raisins and breadcrumbs. For goldfinches, use niger thistle, hulled sunflower seeds and/or black oil-type sunflower seeds. Woodpeckers, chickadees, titmice, and nuthatches will eat black-oil type sunflower seed, cracked nuts, shelled and broken peanuts, breadcrumbs, and suet. For more information or to find a particular bird's preferences, see the resources provided at the end of this article.

You can also try suet feeders, fruit halves nailed to a tree or post, peanut butter smeared into pinecones or onto the side of a tree, and old breads and cakes. Offering several types of foods will ensure a variety of birds visit your backyard. Remember to clean your birdfeeders. For a video of how to do it properly, see "Sanitizing Bird Feeders" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeX-vvoMe0I>. Bottoms of platform feeders (and others that might hold water) should have small holes drilled into the bottom to allow water to drain after a rain.

Speaking of water, be sure to provide water for birds to drink. Add a heater to keep the water from freezing and clean the container periodically to prevent bacteria or mold growth.

Also, beware of cats. House cats are extremely efficient predators and can severely reduce the number of birds and small mammals visiting feeders, especially during winter when birds may be concentrated around feeders. If you care about wildlife, you should keep your cat indoors.

Birds also benefit from leaves and seed heads left in the garden. More information is available from the Audubon Society at: <https://www.audubon.org/magazine/help-birds-winter-go-easy-fall-yard-work>.

One last bit of advice, if you have "heavenly bamboo" (*Nandina domestica*), be aware that this is an invasive non-native plant that is also **poisonous** to small birds, dogs and cats. The best way to protect animals is to remove it. At the very least, remove the berries before they do harm. For more information, see "Nandina Berries Kill Birds" at: <https://delta.audubon.org/news/nandina-berries-kill-birds>.

Resources

“PB1633 Improving Your Backyard Wildlife Habitat,”

https://trace.tennessee.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=utk_agexfish

“Winter Bird Feeding – The Basics,” <https://extension.psu.edu/winter-bird-feeding-the-basics>

“Winter Bird Feeding (factsheet),” <https://extension.unh.edu/resource/winter-bird-feeding-fact-sheet>

“Caring for Birds in the Winter,” <https://extension.psu.edu/caring-for-birds-in-the-winter>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.