

Bird Care – Houses, Baths, and Feeders (published 2025-10-18)
By Kate O'Lenic, Master Gardener

Lots of folks have bird houses, feeders and baths in their yards. So, let's come clean about proper care of them to keep birds safe and healthy.

Bird Houses

There are several important points to know about how a proper bird house is made. The size of the house and of the opening in the front need to be consistent with the species of bird you intend to attract. The best wood is thick (3/4-inch) cedar, cypress or pine that is unpainted and untreated. Screws to join the parts will ensure the house remains tightly sealed to prevent rain from entering. A sloped roof with 2-to-4-inch overhang in the front and 2-inch overhang on the sides helps keep out rain and predators. The floor should be about 1/4 inch above the bottom of the sides to also keep water out. Drainage holes in the floor and ventilation holes in the sides are also important. With all that, it is clear many retail store bird houses are less than ideal. There are, however, plenty of bird-friendly houses for sale from dealers who are knowledgeable about bird safety. Of course, you can make your own, too. For more details about the best design, see "Features of a Good Birdhouse" in Resources at the end of this article.

Now that you have the perfect, safe bird house, it is time to plan maintenance. Cleaning each year is vital for preventing disease and parasite infestations that can cause serious harm to birds. Late summer to early fall is the best time to clean the interior of the house. By then all the fledglings have flown off and birds are not searching for winter quarters yet.

Wear a mask and gloves when removing nesting materials and any debris. Use a brush and soapy water to wash the interior and exterior, rinse, then disinfect with one part bleach to 9 parts water. Let sit for 5 to 10 minutes, rinse again and allow the wood to dry for about 2 days before placing the house back in its location. Remember to wash your hands afterwards.

This is also a good time to check the house over for any repairs that may be needed. Tighten any loose screws, repair cracks in the wood and check that hinges work smoothly.

Bird Feeders

Feeding birds, especially in the winter, goes a long way to help them thrive. Place the feeder in a location safe from birds crashing into windows, away from sites where cats could reach the birds and where squirrels have less chance of raiding the feeder.

To be sure birds remain healthy, regular cleaning of the feeder is necessary. A dirty feeder can potentially cause bacterial, fungal and viral diseases in birds.

Cleaning and disinfecting are needed every week to two weeks. Wear rubber or similar gloves. Empty any contents of the feeder into a trash bag and discard. Wipe the outside and inside of the feeder with bleach solution (one part bleach to 9 parts water). Then let the feeder soak in the bleach solution for 5 to 10 minutes. Rinse and allow to dry completely. Also be sure to clean the ground under the feeder of spilled seeds or other debris. Refill with the feed that is appropriate

for the species of birds native to your area. Check out the Audubon Society's article in Resources for details about feeding birds, "11 Tips for Feeding Backyard Birds".

Bird Baths

Bird baths provide the much-needed drinking and bathing water for birds. Almost anything can be used as a bird bath, from plant saucers to garbage can lids. Baths can be made of plastic, metal or ceramic. The bath should be shallow and have a rough surface or pebbles to provide birds with traction to exit the bath.

No matter what you choose, yes, you guessed it, bird baths need to be cleaned and disinfected frequently. Empty the bath and refill with fresh at least weekly. This helps prevent bacterial build-up. Also once a week, wash with household vinegar and rinse thoroughly. This will help prevent algae growth.

The article "What can I put water in for the birds?" offers all sorts of details about different types of baths, care and placement.

Caring for our fine feathered friends is a wonderful thing to do. It takes a little commitment to provide that care. But it is very much worth it.

Resources

"Features of a Good Birdhouse," <https://nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses/features-of-a-good-birdhouse/>

"Should I Clean Out My Wren House?" <https://www.birdful.org/should-i-clean-out-my-wren-house/>

"11 Tips for Feeding Backyard Birds," <https://www.audubon.org/magazine/11-tips-feeding-backyard-birds>

"What is the Safest Way to Clean a Bird Bath?" <https://www.birdful.org/what-is-the-safest-way-to-clean-a-bird-bath/>

"What can I put water in for the birds?" <https://www.birdful.org/what-can-i-put-water-in-for-the-birds/>

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