

## Feeding Birds During Winter (published 2025-12-06)

By Kate O'Lenic, Master Gardener

During the cold winter months, we can enjoy bird watching from the comfort of our homes by having a bird feeder outdoors and with native plants that provide berries and seeds. The birds will greatly appreciate your help when food sources are scarce. A few basic tips will help you do the best job in helping birds.

### The Food

In the winter, birds rely on seeds, berries, and dried fruit for survival. Many seeds contain oils that provide the fat content birds need in winter. For example, black oil sunflower seeds are great for small birds because of their oil content and thin shells. Blue jays, cardinals and finches like black-oil sunflower, too, as well as safflower seeds and unsalted peanuts. Unsalted peanuts are a treat for titmice, jays, nuthatches, and woodpeckers. Small seeds, such as thistle, attract juncos, mourning doves, goldfinches, and siskins. Suet provides high-energy nutrition and is enjoyed by chickadees, nuthatches, jays, woodpeckers, and titmice. To avoid attracting thugs like sparrows and starlings, omit using cracked corn and sorghum. Shelled regular sunflower seeds are also loved by many birds. Be careful about using a commercial bird seed mix. Many products contain inexpensive fillers that a lot of birds will not eat, such as sorghum (aka milo), canary grass seed, oats, flaxseed, corn, and millet.

A fun project for children is to make an inexpensive feeder with a pinecone, unsalted, unsweetened peanut butter, dried fruit, and seeds. Attach a string to the top of the pinecone to hang it. Smear peanut butter all over and in between the scales. Press the seeds and dried fruit onto the peanut butter. Hang the pinecone outdoors on a tree or shrub, then watch the happy birds. Be sure to use unsweetened, unsalted peanut butter because sugar and salt are not healthy for birds.

There are some great plants that look beautiful and feed birds. Winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*) has a red berry that really lights up the outdoors, serviceberry (*Amelanchier* sp.) and bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*) are also good food sources. Make sure you have native varieties. Birds may ignore the non-native plants. And no feeders are needed. The birds will happily pluck berries off the branches.

### The Feeders

There is a variety of feeder types depending on the birds you are feeding. All feeders need to be easy to clean as regular cleaning is necessary for the safety of the birds. The design of the feeder makes a difference based on what is going in it. For thistle and niger seeds, use a feeder with small holes. A tube or hopper-style bird feeder is good for sunflower seeds. For dried fruit and mealworms, a platform feeder works but many are open to the elements, and the food may get wet and spoil. Suet can be held in mesh feeders or on a platform. Whatever design of feeder you use, protect the seeds and other goodies from rain with a roof and drain holes in case water does get in. Consider a baffle to block squirrels from climbing up to the feeder or at least slow them down. There are bird feeder poles available that are designed to be squirrel-deterrent, but some may be pricey.

Remember to clean feeders about every 2 weeks to keep birds healthy.

### The Feeder Location

Placement of the feeder takes some care. We want the birds to feel safe and we want to see the activity around the feeder. Locating the feeder near trees or shrubs gives the birds a quick hideaway if they feel threatened but keep it about 10 feet away from dense cover that could hide predators. Within 3 feet or more than 30 feet from windows will help avoid birds flying into windows. The recommended height of the feeder off the ground is 5 to 6 feet.

### The Squirrels

Never underestimate the cleverness of squirrels. Caged feeders, weight-activated feeders and tube feeders with baffles are good designs to thwart squirrel raids. Squirrels can jump up to 10 feet or more, so keep the feed at least 10 feet away from trees, fences or decks. A smooth metal pole with a dome-shaped baffle below the feeder makes it difficult for squirrels to get to the feeder, too. Safflower seeds and thistle are unappealing to squirrels. They do LOVE sunflower seeds and peanuts so you might want to avoid using them. Using several tactics can improve your chances of keeping squirrels from stealing your bird feed.

Enjoy the beauty of birds and the good feeling you get when you see birds happily feeding during the cold winter months. They'll be healthier because of your good care.

### **Resources**

“Seeds and Grains,” <https://www.birds.cornell.edu/k12/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/SeedsandGrainsPoster.pdf>

“Five Tips for Winter Bird Feeding,” <https://naturalresources.extension.wisc.edu/five-tips-for-winter-bird-feeding/>

“Tips from the Yard: Winter Bird Feeding Considerations,” <https://u.osu.edu/lorainmgv/2025/02/07/tips-from-the-yard-winter-bird-feeding-considerations/>

“Feeding Birds in Winter,” <https://www.mountunion.edu/Documents/Academics%20Section/Centers/Nature%20Center/NC%20Education%20Resources/Feeding%20Birds%20in%20Winter.pdf>

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

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

“What Should I Hang My Bird Feeder On?” The Institute for Environmental Research and Education <https://iere.org/what-should-i-hang-my-bird-feeder-on/>

“How Do You Keep Squirrels Away from Your Bird Feeder?” <https://iere.org/how-do-you-keep-squirrels-away-from-your-bird-feeder/>

**How do I ask a question?**

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at [www.netmga.net](http://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.