

Backyard Bird Feeders

by Rita Pelczar

BIRD WATCHING and gardening go hand in hand. You can encourage a variety of birds to visit your yard by growing plants with seeds or fruit that birds favor and that provide cover and nesting sites. But when your plants are not serving up sufficient fodder—or if you want to boost the quantity and quality of your offerings—well-stocked bird feeders will fill the bill.



Left: This feeder features a roof designed to keep squirrels from getting the seeds. **Above:** Hummingbird feeders hold nectar.

Feeding backyard birds can provide a lot of entertainment since it allows you to get an up-close look at the fascinating antics of avian wildlife. If you really get hooked on watching your winged visitors, you may want to participate in Cornell Ornithology Lab's Project FeederWatch, a program that tracks the birds that visit feeders during winter (see "Resources," page 52).

To make the most of your bird feeding efforts, you will want to get a good sturdy feeder, locate it in a safe (for the birds) and handy (for you) location, and keep it well stocked with the right kinds of seed and other food.

TYPES OF FEEDERS

Different types of feeders favor different birds. The **platform feeder**—simply a flat tray for holding birdseed—is suitable for

most seed-eating birds. Be sure the tray is equipped with drainage holes so that the seed doesn't soak in water and get moldy. Similarly, a **hopper feeder** features a tray but adds a box for the seed, which is dispensed as the seed in the tray is consumed. Hopper feeders generally can hold more seed, which means less frequent refilling, and they better protect the seed from wind and rain.

Tube feeders come in many sizes; they consist of a central tube that holds the seed and holes through which birds access it. The seed in the tube is usually well protected from moisture. Tube feeders may include perches. Short perches allow small birds such as finches to feed but will discourage larger birds such as jays and grackles. Some tube feeders are designed for tiny nyjer seed, a favorite of finches. Nyjer feeders have

smaller openings and often include perches above the opening.

Hummingbird feeders are designed to dispense nectar (a sugar-water solution) through small tubes or openings. The nectar is contained in a reservoir, either an inverted bottle style or a basin style. Hummingbird nectar can be purchased as a mix, but it's easy to make yourself. Simply boil water and stir in white sugar until it dissolves, using a ratio of four parts water to one part sugar. Allow the solution to cool before offering it to your birds. You can store extra nectar in the refrigerator for a week if need be. Since hummingbird feeders need to be cleaned regularly—every time you replace the nectar, or every three to five days—ease of disassembly and cleaning are important features to consider when selecting one.

Suet feeders are suspended wire mesh cages, bags, or ornamental metal supports that hold suet in place so birds can nibble on it. Most suet, a high-fat food mixture that is a good choice for insect-eaters such as nuthatches and woodpeckers, is made out of beef kidney fat, which is often available (and inexpensive) from your grocer's meat department. You can purchase processed suet cakes or balls that are ready to pop into your feeder or you can make your own (see recipe for Vegetable Shortening "Suet" Cakes, page 51).

Regardless of which type feeders you use, be sure to keep them clean. Bacteria and mold can develop, especially in damp weather, and diseases can be spread in bird droppings. Cornell's Project FeederWatch advises that you wash your feeders approximately every two weeks in mild,



A wire wreath for holding suet balls also serves as an outdoor decoration.

soapy water, then rinse them in a 10 percent bleach solution (one part bleach to nine parts water). Allow feeders to dry thoroughly before refilling them.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT SEEDS

While there are lots of different kinds of bird seed on the market, Project Feeder-Watch has determined that black-oil sunflower seed is the best all-around seed for attracting a wide range of birds to feeders. It has lots of meat for its size, is high in fat, and the shell is thin so even small birds are able to crack it. Finches, chickadees,



Sunflower seeds attract a variety of birds.

titmice, cardinals, and sparrows are particularly fond of it.

Safflower looks like a white sunflower seed. It will attract many of the same birds as black-oil sunflower seeds, although given a choice, they'll usually go for the sunflower seeds first. Nyjer (sometimes called thistle, although it is not related to North American thistle) is favored by finches, so is a good choice if you want finches exclusively at a particular feeder.

Vegetable Shortening "Suet" Cakes

This is a great project to do with kids, and birds love it as a winter treat! I have square wire suet cages to hang the cakes, so I use square, half-pint plastic containers for the molds, filled to about one inch. They fit just right.

- 1 cup solid vegetable shortening
- 1 cup peanut butter
- 2 1/2 cups yellow corn meal
- 1 1/2 cups whole wheat flour
- 1 cup cracked corn

Melt shortening, then remove from heat. Add peanut butter and blend well. Mix in the remaining ingredients. Spoon into plastic tubs or molds and chill. When firm, remove molds and hang the cakes outside immediately, or place in individual plastic bags to freeze for later. —R.P.

Ground-foraging birds such as juncos favor millet, a small round grain. Sprinkling millet beneath your feeders will add another dimension of feeding activity.

Whole corn is an inexpensive feed that wild turkeys and ducks enjoy, while cracked corn is a favorite of doves, quail, jays, and sparrows (for more about seed preferences of Common Feeder Birds," page 52).

Be sure to store bird seed in a cool, dry place to prevent mold. Do not use seed if it becomes moldy.

SITING YOUR FEEDERS

Placement of feeders is an important consideration. To be able to watch your birds as they feed, put the feeders where you are likely to enjoy them—a porch, deck, or in front of a window in the kitchen or family room, for example.

Locate your feeder in a somewhat sheltered spot near some natural cover, ideally some evergreen trees and shrubs, which provide your avian visitors a spot to wait their turn as well as some protection from predators and harsh weather. On the other hand, siting your feeder too close to trees and shrubs provides hiding places for hungry cats and competitive squirrels. A distance of about 10 feet from natural cover is generally considered a good compromise.

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SEED AND FOOD PREFERENCES OF COMMON FEEDER BIRDS

	Chickadees	Nuthatches	Finches	Cardinals & Grosbeaks	Sparrows & Blackbirds	Jays	Woodpeckers	Titmice	Pigeons & Doves
Sunflower	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Safflower		X	X	X				X	
Corn					X	X			X
Millet					X				X
Milo						X			X
Nyjer (Thistle)			X						
Suet	X	X				X	X	X	

Chart adapted from Project FeederWatch of Cornell Lab of Ornithology (www.feederwatch.org), used with permission.

Many birds—perhaps millions each year—are killed when they mistake the reflection of a window as a pathway to another area of your yard. To prevent birds from flying into windows, keep feeders either within three feet of the window—so

they aren't likely to gain enough momentum to injure themselves—or more than 30 feet away from the window—where the reflection will be less inviting.

BIRDS GET THIRSTY, TOO

In addition to feeders, be sure to supply birds with clean water throughout the year. Birdbaths can add ornamental interest to the garden as well as supply the water needs of your birds, but simple shallow bowls of water placed near feeders work well, too. Change the water and clean the bowls frequently, and if you live in an area with cold winters, consider a birdbath heater to prevent ice from forming.

OUTFOXING SQUIRRELS

One of the most common bird feeding problems is squirrels that scare away birds, eat all the seeds, and destroy the feeders. Squirrels have demonstrated amazing skill at scaling poles, leaping from nearby structures, and suspending themselves from all sorts of wires or chains used to support bird feeders in their attempt to devour the contents. There are strategies that can help prevent or at least minimize squirrels' ravaging your feeders.

Baffles are fairly effective—at least until the squirrels figure out another way to the feeder. These dome-shaped or cylindrical devices suspended above hanging feeders or attached below feeders mounted on poles create a physical barrier for the squirrels.

Some tube feeders include a cage surrounding the tube that allows small birds to enter the feeding area while keeping squirrels outside of it. Be sure the cage has sufficiently small openings, otherwise squirrels will find their way inside.

Other bird feeders are weight activated: feeding ports remain open for lightweight birds, but close in response to the heft of a squirrel on the feeding platform. And some feeders employ a mild electric shock or can be mounted on a device that



This feeder is enclosed in a wire cage to prevent squirrels from getting to the seeds.

spins the whole feeder until the squirrel is dislodged.

A different strategy is to feed squirrels their own repast in a separate part of the yard. Squirrel feeders are usually built to hold peanuts or dried ears of corn—some of their favorite foods.

So as winter approaches and seeds and berries become more scarce, welcome bird life into your backyard with a well-stocked bird feeder, then sit back and enjoy the show.

Rita Pelczar is a contributing editor for The American Gardener.

Resources

Birds at Your Feeder by Erica H. Dunn and Diane L. Tessaglia-Hymes. W.W. Norton Co., New York, 2001.

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Duncraft, www.duncraft.com.

Gardener's Supply, www.gardeners.com.

Outdoor Birdfeeders, Inc., www.outdoorbirdfeeders.com.