

Attracting Birds To Your Feeders

The decision to put out a feeder to attract wild birds can lead to many rewarding moments. You will see different species as the seasons change and there is the possibility you might see species that are new to you or your yard. Along with the decision to feed birds come certain responsibilities. Since you are attracting birds to your space, it is imperative that you do all you can to insure the safety and well-being of the birds you are feeding. This sheet provides an introduction to feeding birds in a manner that helps assure their safety.

Who might come?

For those birds that are strictly insectivorous, there is little that you can do to attract them beyond having a pesticide-free yard where insects can find plenty of cover from the cool, wet weather. Seed-eating birds, however, can be easily attracted to your yard. Chickadees, American Goldfinches, House Finches and Dark-eyed Juncos are often among the easiest to attract.

Seeds for attracting birds

Many varieties of seed are available, but not all are worth using. Small bags of "birdseed" are available in many stores, from variety shops to grocery stores. Much of this seed is a mixture of white millet with a small amount of larger red millet and sunflower seed. In some places in North America, white millet (also called proso millet) may attract birds, but here in the Willamette Valley, it is usually rejected and simply ends up being scattered on the ground, since the birds throw it aside in search of higher-quality seed.

Sunflower seeds are one of the best and most readily available seeds that you can use. **Black oil sunflower** is the best variety to use as it provides high nutritional value and its small size makes it easy for small birds, such as goldfinches or Pine Siskins, to open and extract the contents. Grosbeaks, jays and other medium-sized birds also enjoy these seeds. Black oil sunflower seeds are also highly prized for the clear oil, preferred by Europeans for cooking and becoming more popular in this country as well.

Black oil sunflower seed can be provided in a wide variety of feeders ranging from simple platforms, to hoppers with attached feeding trays at the bottom, or tube feeders specifically designed for these seeds. Smaller birds, such as chickadees, House Finches, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and Goldfinches all are attracted to a tube feeder full of sunflower seeds. Larger birds, such as jays, have more difficulty sitting on the perches of these tube feeders and prefer larger bin and platform feeders.

If you are concerned about debris from the shells left behind, you can purchase sunflower seeds that have been removed from the shells. While this may be more tidy, it will be a much more expensive way to buy your seed. Such shelled seed is for human benefit since the birds have no difficulty in opening the shells to reach the seed.

A second popular seed is **Nyjer**. You may know this as "Niger" or "thistle." Nyjer® is actually a registered trademark of the Wild Bird Feeding Institute (WBFI). The name was registered in 1998 to avoid mispronouncing the word "niger" (which is still used in Europe) and to remove any association with thistles. Nyjer is still commonly called thistle seed but this is inaccurate as this plant is completely unrelated to any thistle. Many non-native thistles are noxious, invasive weeds.

Nyjer, *Guizotia abyssinica*, is native to Africa, and is a yellow-flowered member of the Aster Family, widely cultivated in Ethiopia and India. It does not grow well anywhere in the United States, and as much as 50,000 tons of Nyjer is imported into this country from India and Ethiopia each year. The U.S. Department of Agriculture



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requires that all shipments of Nyjer seed admitted into the United States be heat-treated, thus preventing the germination of dodder seeds which are a common contaminant often found in Nyjer shipments. Dodder is listed as a federal noxious weed and is forbidden from being imported into this country.

The small size and very high oil content (up to 40%) of Nyjer make it very attractive to some birds, especially goldfinches and Pine Siskins. It initially may seem expensive, but a little goes a long way. There are tube feeders with small openings designed just for this seed. A small mesh bag also works well as a way to provide Nyjer. The birds cling to the bag and extract the small seeds through the open mesh. If you hang such a bag, be sure to keep it covered with a dome or some other cover to protect it from the rain. Wet seed can grow mold that may harm the birds.

If you want to buy some other specialty seeds, consider **safflower** seeds or **peanuts**. However, while the birds may thank you, your pocketbook may give you second thoughts about providing these in quantity. Jays and other large birds eagerly take whole peanuts and smaller birds will eat shelled peanuts. Be sure not to use salted peanuts as the excess salt may cause harm to the birds.

Another food to consider is **suet**. This animal fat is an excellent high-energy source of fuel for many birds. A wide variety of suet cakes are available, often with varied "treats" embedded in the fat. Some have sunflower seeds or peanuts and some have fruits. Despite these extra tidbits, it is the fat that the birds are seeking. A hanging basket of suet will often attract a flock of wandering Bushtits as well as chickadees, nuthatches, any wintering warblers (such as Townsend's Warbler) or, if you are fortunate, a woodpecker, such as Northern Flicker or Downy Woodpecker.

Protect the birds you feed

Once you have decided to provide food for wild birds, give careful consideration as to where you place your feeders so that birds will not become victims of marauding cats. All feeders need to be inaccessible to cats (many of which can jump up to six feet high) and the birds need a safe place to flee to where a cat is not waiting. Prune low-growing bushes up at least two feet from the ground so that cats cannot hide easily.

Feeders should not be placed where birds will see the reflection of trees in windows. This may cause them to not see the window, believing that they can reach the "trees" beyond. If this is a problem, streamers dangling from the window or objects placed on the glass may help discourage them and prevent these tragic accidents.

Be sure that your feeders are placed in such a manner to prevent the seed from becoming wet. Wet seed can quickly become moldy and some of these molds can infect the air passages of birds, eventually resulting in death. Discard any wet seed where it cannot be found by birds, clean and dry your feeder and replace the wet seed with dry seed.

If you use any platform feeders or feeding trays, be sure that they remain clean. Do not allow bird droppings to accumulate as this can sometimes be a source of disease that is transmitted from bird to bird.

Maintain your feeders year-round, but especially during the winter months. If the birds have come to depend on your feeders as a readily available food source, it is important that the feeder does not become suddenly empty. The birds will find other foods but they will need to expend more energy seeking out new sources of food if yours is suddenly unavailable.

