



Bird Feeding

Backyard Habitat for Wildlife

Feeding birds in the autumn and winter is especially rewarding. Following are some helpful hints for satisfying our hungry feathered friends:

The Bird Feeder

There are four types of seed feeders. The **platform feeder** is a shallow wooden box with a screen bottom and may be placed on the ground, on a tree stump or clamped to a deck railing. The **hopper feeder** is like a platform feeder with a roof and sides to hold the seed dry inside. The last two **seed feeders** are tube shaped; one has large feeder ports for sunflower seed and the other has tiny feeder ports for thistle niger seed. The tube may be plastic, glass, or metal; may have a wire cage surrounding the tube; and may have a circular tray attachment. Both tube and hopper feeders can be hung or bolted to a pole.

If you only want one feeder, either the sunflower tube with metal feeding ports or a metal hopper feeder would be best.

Bird feeders can be homemade or purchased. Besides feeder cost, consider the following:

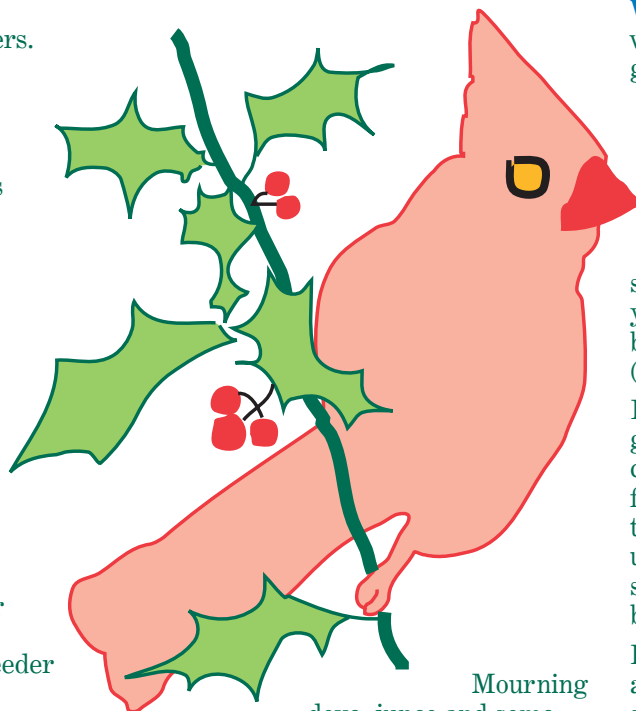
- **Durability** - will it last several years and are replacement parts available.
- **Capacity** - small feeders are emptied sooner while larger feeders hold more seed but are heavier.
- **Design** - the feeder should keep seed dry, be easy to fill and clean. Lastly, squirrels can chew through wood and plastic but not metal and wire.

Bird Feeding Tips

Black oil sunflower and striped **sunflower seeds** attract the greatest diversity of seed-eating birds to your yard. Sunflower chips are more expensive but eliminate messy sunflower shells.

Safflower is a white seed which squirrels and blackbirds don't eat but cardinals, chickadees, red-bellied woodpeckers, mourning doves and others will eat.

The more expensive **thistle or niger seed** is used to attract gold finches, house finches and purple finches.



Mourning dove, junco and some sparrows will also eat thistle from a ground feeder or hopper.

White proso millet is usually found in less expensive seed mixes. Millet is eaten by birds such as juncos, blackbirds, sparrows, doves (and buntings in the spring and summer).

Peanuts in the shell and peanut pieces are especially attractive to woodpeckers, jays, nuthatches, titmice and chickadees. Roasted, no salt and no sugar, are the healthiest peanuts for feeding birds; avoid peanut hearts and raw peanuts. Birds will even eat peanut butter! Spread **peanut butter** onto large pine cones, sprinkle bird seed over the cone and then hang it from a tree branch. Stuff peanut butter-corn meal mixture (or suet) into carved holes of a wooden dowel or dead branch, then hang.

The same birds that like peanuts also like **suet or beef kidney fat**. Suet and peanut butter are high energy foods and are best used during winter months since both can melt and turn rancid in warm weather.

Whole kernel corn is eaten by blue jays, woodpeckers (and squirrels), while many ground feeding birds prefer **cracked corn**. Be aware that cracked corn is vulnerable to rot when wet and that many mammals like to feed on corn.

Potential Feeding Problems

Unclean feeders or rotting, moldy bird seed can cause birds to get sick and spread disease to other birds. Be sure your bird seed is kept dry. Disinfect birdseed feeders with dilute bleach (10%) and water.

If many undesirable birds such as grackles, starlings, brown-headed cowbirds, or crows are hogging your feeders, try feeding only safflower and thistle seed (only in thistle feeder with upside down feeding ports); eliminate sunflower, millet, cracked corn and any bread items.

Feeding songbirds may attract other animals to your yard. Raccoons, squirrels and mice come to feast on birdseed while hawks and cats come to catch a feathered meal. Be prepared to deal with surprise visitors at your backyard feeders.

Other Suggestions

Remember, **fresh water** is as important in fall and winter as in other seasons; special heating units can keep bird baths ice-free. **Berry and nut producing plants** are important sources of natural food. Shrubs and trees, especially those with thorns, are vital for roosting cover and protection from predators and stormy weather. Brush piles make excellent places for birds to hide and roost. Locate your feeders where you can see them but also near protective cover.

For more information about bird feeding and backyard bird identification:

Feeder Birds of Eastern North America
by Roger Tory Peterson
Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.

The Bird Feeder Book
by Donald and Lillian Stokes
Little Brown and Company, 1987.