



DON'T FORGET THE BIRDS THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Many folks enjoy the holidays with family and friends but at this time of year, our avian acquaintances will be grateful for whatever food and water sources you can provide. Depending on the weather, winter can often be hard on birds. While it is true that native species have adapted to our northern winters, unpredictable weather patterns can make expected resources less available so a little help for our friends is appreciated. In return, observing birds at our feeders brings us closer to nature and their activity enlivens cold, dreary winter days.

Those new to feeding birds will find a number of feeder styles to choose from including tube feeders, hoppers, platform feeders and suet holders. Which one to pick depends in part on the birds you want to attract and how easy it is to clean. Tube feeders are great for smaller birds like chickadees, tufted titmice and sparrows. Some of the hopper feeders close when squirrels or heavier birds like blue jays or grackles land on their perches.



Wooden bird feeder. Photo by dmp2019

Platform feeders attract both ground feeding birds such as mourning doves and juncos but also larger birds such as cardinals and flickers. Nyger feeders are meant to be filled with smaller

thistle seed attractive to finches. Woodpeckers and nuthatches adore suet feeders, but many other bird species do as well.

When purchasing a feeder, do consider how easy or difficult it would be to clean. I'm not sure how aware folks were of the avian flu outbreak in Connecticut this summer but just like we can transmit diseases to each other, so can birds. We can wash our hands and use sanitizer but birds at feeding stations depend on you to keep them clean. Ideally feeders should be cleaned every other week. Wash them in hot, soapy water and then use a dilute bleach solution as a final rinse.

As far as seed selection goes, black oil sunflower seed with its thin shell seems to attract the greatest number of bird species to my feeders. I use this exclusively in a window feeder while the larger tube type feeder is filled with a combination of sunflower, safflower, white proso miller, peanuts and on sale wild bird seed mixes. Cracked corn can be added to platform or lower ground feeders as it attracts game birds like turkeys as well as crows and songbirds. Do not let it get wet and sit as it can mold and moldy corn is not good for birds or any animal to feed on.

When feeders are hung is very important. It is estimated that at least 150 million (if not more) birds die because they fly into windows each year in just the U.S. Place feeders either within 3 feet of a window so they can't reach speeds to injure themselves if they are startled and fly into the window or at least 30 feet away from windows.

If you do have large window expanses, walk around the outside of your dwelling and look into them. Do you see blue sky, green gardens or forests or another natural looking scenario? Chances are birds do too and are likely to fly into them resulting in injury or death. Consider putting up bird scare decals, leaving screens on them year-round or even covering these windows with Bird Screen, a commercial product that is designed to lessen the number of bird collisions. Another alternative are homemade frames with hanging strings or cords on a dowel that could be attached to the outsides of windows. If you have found one or more dead birds under a particular window, be sure to make that one a priority.

Other threats to note are roaming cats and natural predators. Do not put up feeders if cats freely wander through the neighborhood. This would be a cruel way to lure native birds to their death. Make sure hawks, foxes or other predators are not targeting birds coming to your feeders. If so, discontinue feeding for a few weeks and restart but be observant.

Bears attracted to feeders are becoming a problem in many parts of Connecticut. While they hibernate during really cold periods, bears may remain active during milder winters and if they are able to access your feeder, it is likely best to just discontinue feeding the birds this year or at least until reliably cold weather sets in.

Feeding the birds comes with responsibilities that should not be taken lightly. Birds appreciate the food and water we can provide and it is up to us to make sure we are offering them these resources in a safe way to help them through harsh winters.

For more information on feeding birds check out the [CT DEEP](#) or the [CT Audubon](#) websites. For answers to your gardening questions feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home &

Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.