



This is For the Birds!

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center



Titmouse on the solar sipper. Photo by Dawn Pettinelli

As December brings frigid temperatures and snowy landscapes to Connecticut, our feathered friends face unique challenges in finding the resources they need to survive. Shorter days and frozen ground make food and water scarcer, while icy winds and snow create harsh conditions for shelter. By providing birds with seed, water, and shelter, you may be making a significant difference in their survival and well-being during this often challenging season.

Winter robs many birds of their natural food sources like insects, berries, and seeds. While it is true that birds can survive without our subsidies, supplemental feeding can provide extra energy that birds need to maintain their body heat. In December, focus on offering high-calorie foods that cater to a variety of species common to Connecticut, such as chickadees, cardinals, juncos, and woodpeckers.

Many types of bird feeders are available including hopper and platform feeders, tubes, and suet cages. Whichever you choose, it should be one that can be washed out every week or so. Uneaten seed pieces and other debris can mold plus there is the chance of contagions whenever living creatures congregate.

Feeding the birds is a popular activity and there are many types of seeds, seed mixes and other foods available for purchase. Black-oil sunflower seeds are a favorite of many birds, thanks to their high-fat content and thin shells, which are easy to crack. You can buy shelled seeds to minimize the pile of shells that accumulates under the feeder. Smaller white safflower seeds are included in many seed mixes and are reputed to be a favorite of cardinals. Thistle or Niger seeds

are a sought-after treat for finches and other small birds. I have only tried using a thistle sock once and found it got soggy, and the seeds froze so maybe a specialized tube feeder would be the way to go if offering this food source.

Unshelled peanuts are a great fuel for birds supplying both protein and fat. They are also a sure way to attract squirrels. I have been buying unsalted, dry roasted peanuts and put a few handfuls on my porch railing each morning when I put out the water bowl for the birds. There's a regular assortment of birds who eagerly await their morning breakfast and the peanuts are gobbled up by titmice, chickadees, flickers, downy woodpeckers and blue jays before the squirrel even has a chance to make it to the porch from the woods.

A good seed mix for the feeder should contain a variety of food items including black-oil sunflower seed, cracked corn, safflower, peanut chips, white proso millet, and maybe some sunflower hearts and dried fruit. Like most things in life, you get what you pay for, and cheaper mixes often contain that red milo and other fillers that birds in our area are not partial to. If you notice piles of uneaten seeds under your feeders, try switching to another seed mix.

Many bird species, but especially insect eaters, really love suet. Packed with fat, suet provides essential energy and attracts woodpeckers, nuthatches, blue jays and I've even had crows in queue for their turn at the suet feeder. Opt for suet mixed with seeds, berries, nuts or mealworms for added nutrition.

Place feeders in somewhat sheltered areas to protect birds from the winds but make sure that they are not located near where predators can hide. Refill regularly, as food is quickly consumed in cold weather. Be on the lookout for bears. Typically, they are not a problem from mid-December through mid-March but if a bear finds your feeder, bring it in and cease feeding.

During a typical, cold winter water is a rare and precious resource. While snow can provide hydration, many birds prefer liquid water for drinking and bathing. Maintaining a water source in freezing temperatures can be a lifesaver. I opt for a Solar Sipper that I have had for years. It is just a bowl inside a bowl with a cover that has a hole in the top. It keeps the water from freezing down into the 20s, especially on a sunny day. I just bring it in at night, wash it and put out clean water in the morning. Heated birdbaths are another more hi-tech option.

December's freezing temperatures and strong winds make safe shelter essential for birds. They need places to roost, stay warm, and avoid predators. Encourage birds to stay in your yard by planting native trees, shrubs, and evergreens. Dense conifers like spruce, hemlock, and pine provide excellent cover from snow and wind. Additionally, leaving leaf piles or brush heaps in your yard creates ground-level shelter for birds like sparrows and juncos. Refrain from cutting back seedheads from coneflowers, coreopsis, goldenrods, sunflowers and native grasses to provide natural seed sources.

Providing food, water, and shelter not only supports birds during the toughest months but also brings joy to your home. Watching vibrant cardinals against the snow or hearing the cheerful calls of chickadees can brighten even the coldest day. By creating a welcoming space for birds in

your backyard, you contribute to their survival and get to enjoy the beauty of nature during winter's quiet, cold days.

For 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.