



## UConn Home & Garden Education Center



### Feed the Birds!

By Susan Pelton

One of the most enjoyable parts of the New England winter season is observing the abundance of birds at the backyard feeder. We all know the importance of providing easily available food sources for the many avian species that remain in the area during the cold winter months. According to the National Audubon Society, over 100 North American bird species supplement their natural diets with birdseed, suet, fruit and nectar obtained from feeders. However, food is not the only resource that should be provided. It is important to also provide fresh water and ample cover that is both safe from predators and protected from inclement weather.



For some people providing food for the birds means simply buying a bag of broad-range seed and putting it into a feeder, for others it becomes a hobby that includes tailoring the types of food provided to the specific needs of different bird species. Black oil sunflower seed is preferred by many small feeder birds and striped sunflower seed is most easily consumed by large-beaked birds. We use the shelled hearts of black oil sunflower or safflower seeds in our feeder. Although they seem more expensive initially, a 40 lb. bag of seed hearts is all consumable nutrition with no wasted shells. Seed hearts benefit humans by eliminating the ground mess that can accompany whole seeds and also benefits the birds as they don't have to expend energy trying to crack open the seeds before they can eat. With the frigid temperatures that we experience during the winter our little feathered friends need all of the help that they can get!



We attract cardinals, finches, goldfinches, blue jays, chickadees, nuthatches, and juncos to the sunflower heart feeder. Along with the black-oil sunflower and safflower seeds, other calorie dense foods include millet and cracked corn which are beneficial to ground feeders such as doves, blue jays, sparrows, juncos and crows. Thistle, also called nyjer, will bring goldfinches. An expensive seed, it is best offered in a thistle feeder that has tiny holes that make the seed available only to the small-beaked species. Suet will attract insect-eating birds such as woodpeckers, wrens, chickadees, titmice and nuthatches. Suet, which is made from rendered animal fat, should not be put out during warm weather as it may go rancid.

The next aspect of providing for the birds is to offer fresh water for drinking and bathing. Fresh water for bathing is especially important during the cold months as it helps birds clean their feathers of the dirt that would otherwise allow water to penetrate through to the layer of down and skin. A few years ago, we purchased an electric heater for the bird bath. Our investment has more than paid for itself in the amusement that comes from watching the birds drink and splash about. It does require some vigilance on our part as the water level will go down quickly due to consumption, evaporation and spillage. The bird bath should also be scrubbed regularly to keep it clean. The National Audubon Society recommends using a weak bleach solution, 10-1, of water to bleach once or twice a month. Be sure to rinse it thoroughly. This method is recommended for feeders also.



Feeders should be set up at least 3 feet from any windows to prevent startled birds from flying into them and being injured. They should also be placed at least 6 feet up from the ground so that neighborhood cats can't prey on the feeding birds. Do not place feeders in an area where they will be difficult to clean and fill once there is a snow cover. Birds will continue to look for food once they have established the habit of coming to the feeder so feeders should be consistently filled. Purchase feeders that will hold an adequate amount of seed so that they don't require filling daily.

Finally, provide ample cover so that birds will feel safe during their eating and bathing. Our feeders are nestled high among our wisteria vines which not only give some cover but allow the birds to easily perch as they await their turn at the feeder. Nearby native plants such as winterberry, holly, and fir trees provide food from berries that remain on them into the winter and nesting sites. The birds seem to spend most of the day flying between these areas and the feeders. So, give the birds food, water and shelter and then sit back and enjoy their show!

For questions on feeding birds or on any home and garden questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271, online at [ladybug@uconn.edu](mailto:ladybug@uconn.edu), or visit your local Cooperative Extension Center.