



It's Time to Winterize Your Yard for the Birds

By Diane Tilton

As I write this in late November, we haven't had any snow and not many nights below freezing but winter is almost here and the birds have already started to prepare for the cold temperatures and a reduced food supply. In the fall, birds will start to scout out feeders for a dependable food source during winter. Many species will have even cached some food for eating later in the winter in case food isn't available. The bird will need more calories to keep warm just at the time when natural food sources are declining. If you haven't already gotten your winter seed out, now is the time to do it!

If you choose to feed birds in winter, you can provide the birds food during a difficult time and you're going to be creating some amazing bird watching opportunities for yourself too. Before you put out feeders, you'll need to make a few decisions that will increase your bird watching chances and to improve the benefits you'll be providing the birds. Most importantly: which food you'll be providing and where to put it. Remember, all animals need three things to survive... food, water and shelter.

When you choose a feeder site, you'll want to take a few things into consideration. First and foremost, if you have outside cats that frequent your yard, please think through if you should be encouraging birds to your yard. Outdoor cats are good hunters and will kill birds if they can catch them. Don't put feeders in trees where cats can easily grab a bird from a feeder. Next, consider where you can see the bird feeders so you can watch them getting the feed. Birds are funny, gregarious creatures and you'll get to know some individuals and, if you are a beginning birder, having a bird at a feeder is a great opportunity to compare the bird to your bird book or phone app to identify the birds in your yard. Be careful about putting a feeder right near a window. Bird strikes on windows are a major cause of bird mortalities. The reflection in the window often looks like they are flying into trees, when they are really flying right into a solid object. There are some stickers on the market that are almost invisible to the human eye but birds can see them and they reduce the likelihood of them flying right into the window.

There are many types of feeders and food on the market. Choosing the right combination of feeders and food will determine the birds you are attracting. Some of the bird seed that can be purchased at big box or grocery stores is mostly fillers. Choose a food with high quality ingredients such as black oil sunflower seeds, white proso millet, safflowers and raw peanuts.

Birds that are ground feeders, like doves and juncos, will also like cracked corn. When feeding thistle, be sure to use a feeder that is specially designed for it.

There are many types of feeders to choose from. Choose one or a variety depending on which birds you'd like to encourage into your yard and how much space you have.

- Ground feeders are just what they sound like. They are screened bottom trays that sit close to the ground and keep food and bird droppings from making contact with each other. Place these feeders in open areas at least 10 feet from the closest tree or bush to give the birds a chance to flee from predators.
- Sunflower seed feeders are a great choice if you're going to have just one feeder in your yard. The feeder should be at least five feet off the ground and put it near a window so you can enjoy the birds! You should see titmice, nuthatches, chickadees and siskins.
- Suet feeders are favorites of nuthatches, woodpeckers and other insect eating birds. Suet is made from animal fat and is a great addition to seed feeders when there aren't many insects around. Hang one from a tree or a pole near other feeders.
- Thistle feeders are designed specifically for thistle. The seed can only be accessed by small-beaked finches.

You might even attract some non-birds as well. I have never met a squirrel who wasn't interested in bird food so, if you have squirrels in your yard, consider purchasing a squirrel proof feeder or buy enough food to keep the squirrels fed too. In the warmer months, we discourage feeding birds in areas where bears can get to the feeders. Bird seed, suet and hummingbird food are some of bears' favorite foods and we often find nuisance bears have been enjoying the food left for the birds.

If you have as many leaves and limbs in your yard as I do right now, you'll like what I have to say next! How about making a brush pile where birds can nest, perch, or use as a hiding place from predators. Leave dead trees where they stand, if safe. The birds will love to eat the bugs that live in decaying wood. A cavity-nesting bird might even move in. Create a brush pile for ground dwelling birds, like sparrows. Inside the brush pile, they can hide and find protection from the winter weather. Use thicker branches as your base and add thinner ones as a "roof". Now you know what to do with your Christmas tree after you take it down! I'm giving you permission to skip tidying up your yard this winter. Rake your leaves under your shrubs and it will act as mulch and it will give insects a nice warm place to live and the birds some nice bugs to eat! In the spring, the dead plant material might make some good nest building materials! Let your annuals stay in the garden, even after they have died, so that the birds can find the seeds!

Disease can also be spread through feeding stations, so it's important that you keep the feeders clean and disease free. Feeders and birdbaths need to be cleaned at least twice a month (I'd

recommend once a week) to reduce the chance of avian disease transmission. Use a solution of 90% water and 10% non-chlorine bleach to clean them. Birdbaths should be dumped out and refilled every day.

Once your feeders are up and filled, you can sit back and enjoy the birds!