

# Feeding wild birds in your garden

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Research indicates that almost half of us, adults in the UK, feed birds in our gardens. But how much do we really know about the pros and cons of what we are feeding and the how's and when's of laying food out? If our choice of food or hygiene precautions cause adverse effects, we are unlikely to ever see them. Here are the basics of sound bird-feeding, to enhance this wonderful way of bringing wildlife closer to our homes.

## **The four seasons**

Birds use the food we provide for different purposes during the year –to keep their energy-costly bodies warm in cold winters, to feed their chicks with in the summer months and, in the autumn, to build up good energy reserves for winter survival. So your food will be welcomed all year round, but should be suited to the specific needs that the time of year imposes.

## **Spring**

is a time of recovery and birds are active courting, establishing territories and nest-building. The breeding season is about to start. And yet, especially in early spring, with harsh nights and cold spells both insect and plant life can be scarce. So don't abandon your winter feeding regime, only substitute high energy with high protein foods. Abandon fat-balls, bird-cake and nuts (including peanuts) and provide summer seed mixtures, black sunflower seeds, pinhead oatmeal, live foods such as mealworms or wax-worms, grated mild cheese, soaked dried fruit or cereal. Soft fresh fruit is also good -try apples, pears, bananas or grapes. With the onset of the breeding season, as chicks begin to appear, care should be taken to reduce particle sizes of large foods such as peanuts (if you must use them) to avoid the risk of choking to young birds. Place these in wire mesh feeders, which force birds to break the food up before retrieving it. Due to the needs of hatchlings, peanuts, fat and bread are best avoided.

## **Summer**

Continue the routine for spring, if conditions are good, or the first brood has failed some species will produce a second brood so keep the food chick-friendly and nutrient high. This is also a time of moulting, further increasing the need for a good high-protein food supply.

## **Autumn**

Late summer and early autumn often see the decline of birds from feeding stations. There is no need for concern –with the arrival of fruits and berries and the associated

insect life, this is the most plentiful time of year and the birds are most likely turning to natural food supplies. As autumn progresses, increase the energy content of food as birds start to build energy reserves for the cold months ahead.

## Winter

As plant life and insect populations decline and withdraw with the onset of winter, natural food becomes hard to find. Warm-blooded like ourselves, birds need to convert a large proportion of the energy they derive from food into heat to keep their body temperature stable. Whereas the human body maintains a temperature of 37-38C, the bird body temperature is as high as 41-42C, and with a high surface to volume ratio causing rapid heat loss small birds find it particularly hard to find enough food to stay alive in low temperatures. So feed birds regularly, if possible twice a day in winter, they may be relying on your food to survive and remain fit for breeding the following spring. The best times are morning and early afternoon, before birds start settling down for the night.

Concentrate on high-energy foods –anything containing high levels of fat, and stay away from low energy foods such as bread and cereals. Good sources of fat are nuts including peanuts, black sunflower seeds (higher fat content than striped ones), fat-balls and bird-cake (as they contain either lard or suet) and mild cheese. Soaked dried fruit is also good due to the high natural sugar content and mealworm or other live foods will be a welcome treat for insect-eating birds who will be struggling to find worms in the hard ground. Leave out apples and pears, soft and bruised fruit is fine, thrushes and blackbirds will appreciate it.

### **Make your own fat balls**

Gently heat suet or lard until just melted. Pour into a mixture of seeds, nuts, dried fruit, oatmeal, cheese or cake. Use two thirds mix to one third fat. Stir well and pour into a plastic cup, coconut shell or other container until set. Feed out of the container or turn out onto a bird table.

If natural water supplies freeze, provide fresh water every day, needless to say, under no circumstances should you add salt or anti-freeze, which can be poisonous, to the water to prevent it from freezing.

You can also provide nest-boxes which will be dry, warm places for small birds to roost during the winter, and possibly nest in, in spring.

## What not to feed

Anything containing artificially added salt such as salted or dry-roasted peanuts, cat and dog food, crisps and salty snacks. Nuts unfit for human consumption as they can be toxic—always choose a reputable dealer.

## Hygiene precautions

Any area where large numbers of birds congregate presents an increased risk of infection by parasites or disease. Salmonella, naturally present in low levels can

cause an outbreak if hygiene standards are low. Sweep both the surfaces and underneath feeding stations and bird baths regularly to remove uneaten food and droppings and wash occasionally with boiling water. You can use a weak 10% disinfectant solution, but only if you are able to rinse and wash out thoroughly. If your feeding station is mobile, move once or twice a year.

So now you know the basics! Have a look at our other downloadable guides on bird foods, feeder types, cultivating live foods and nest-boxes on insertlink. And happy bird-feeding!

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