

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Winter can be a difficult time for birds that remain in our area. Because of the cold weather, there are fewer insects and natural seeds, berries and other fruit available. Birds need more food to maintain body temperatures and can spend more time in search of food.

Fatty foods are important for winter birds, and help provide quick and more efficient energy. Some recommended sources are suet (the hard fat trimmed from beef) and peanut butter. Peanut butter should be mixed with suet or seed, or cracked corn for instance, to lessen the chance of birds choking on the sticky, thick peanut butter. Suet can also be mixed with seeds. Special suet hangers can be purchased to hang in trees around your yard, or spread these mixtures in large pine cones and hang in trees.

Seeds such as black oil sunflower provide high levels of carbohydrates and some vitamins and protein. They can be put in special sunflower feeders that keep them dry and limit seeds falling on the ground.

Cracked corn, thistle seed, white millet and nutmeats are also good winter food sources. If you buy seeds separately, you can choose which feed to use, and limit the seeds that birds avoid. If you buy inexpensive mixtures, you will soon see which seeds the birds leave behind. Talk with a knowledgeable person who sells wild bird seed products, and ask about the choices of feeders for the types of seed and birds you hope to attract. Avoid feeding any bakery foods like crackers and breads, and of course, sweetened products.

Feeding wildlife involves some added responsibilities to avoid feeder problems. You don't want your cat or the neighbor's cat to use your feeding areas as bird bait for our feline friends. So leave plenty of open areas around feeders so cats cannot hide. You can also surround the area under the feeder with 18 inch high chicken wire to prevent easy catches by cats. Consider keeping your cat indoors...it is certainly best for the birds.

Extra feed on the ground will likely attract rats and mice too, so make a habit of feeding only enough for each day. On the other hand, the concentration of birds around a feeder may attract an occasional small hawk (either Cooper's or sharp-shinned hawk). Since they need to survive too, and are part of Mother Nature's plan, consider them a visual gift. The songbirds are used to watching for these predators, and will scatter and seek protection in surrounding shrubs.

Feeders should be kept clean and free from diseases. Before filling the feeder, shake and dislodge any compacted seed and discard this old seed. Try placing the feeder where the seed will keep dry during our rainy winter. Also disinfect feeders about once a month with a weak solution of bleach (one-quarter cup bleach to two gallons of water) and scrub or soak the feeder. Rinse and allow to dry completely before filling again.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.