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Factsheet Number 2

Feeding wild birds in your garden

Many people like to supplement their garden birds' diet with extra food – especially in the winter. This can be a real life-saver in harsh weather. What benefits the birds also benefits the human inhabitants of the house, by the addition of beautiful wild creatures and hours of entertainment. There is also an important knock-on effect for the organic gardener – birds will get used to searching for food in your garden and will search for greenfly, caterpillars and snails during the rest of the year.

The main questions that are asked about feeding are:

- When?
- Where?
- What?
- and even Why?



When?

Although a fair proportion of our birds migrate south in the winter in order to carry on eating their main food-source, insects, our resident birds have to compete with birds, such as thrushes and blackbirds, that have migrated here from northern countries, such as Scandinavia. After the glut of autumn fruits has passed, and insects are no longer flying, winter is the time to feed the birds.

When should I stop?

There are two schools of thought on this. One says you should stop (gradually) once winter is over and more natural foods are available; the other says that stopping increases the stress to birds when they are already under pressure building nests, defending territories etc. It is true that allowing blue tits to feed their young on whole peanuts is likely to cause their death as the young birds can't digest the nuts.

You could strike a happy medium and switch to other foods, perhaps hanging up the bone from the Sunday joint, or other such high protein food. There should be plenty of natural food available in the garden in summer, with caterpillars, greenfly etc. in abundance, but many people continue feeding, especially with wild bird seed mix - available (at a very competitive price) from the Trust and most good pet shops.

Where?

Different species of birds have different feeding habits. Hanging food is ideal for members of the tit family, so using a peanut dispenser, of which there are numerous designs, is fine. Site it high enough up so that cats can't get at it. A good idea is to put it near to roses or other shrubs where you may have trouble with greenfly or caterpillars - they will be found too!

If the food is too exposed, the birds may be in danger from sparrowhawks, so it is best to provide cover nearby, like trees or hedges. Don't site the food near nest boxes, as the busy atmosphere will put the birds off nesting.

Bird tables are suited to most types of bird and have the benefit of being off the ground so other foraging animals like mice and rats can't get at it. A roof to the bird table helps to keep rain off but is not essential. Don't be tempted by "the rustic look" - this makes it very easy for a cat to climb, and birds rarely have

success if they nest in one of those quaint bird tables that have a nest box attached - they are just too busy.

Many birds prefer to eat on the ground, so put food on the lawn - well away from shrubs which can be hiding a cat. Don't put too much out at once - if it's still there when night comes, the rodent population will flourish!

If you have old trees, you can smear fats and fix nuts into crevices in the trunk, which nuthatches, treecreepers and woodpeckers adore.

Fresh water should be provided at all times, in a shallow container so birds can drink and bathe without danger of drowning. If the bird bath is on the ground or in the form of a pond, then other animals, such as hedgehogs will use it and it is important to have sloping sides so that animals can get in and out.

What?

High energy foods, various nuts and seeds.

Soaked bread (white or brown) - dry bread swells in the stomach.

Leftovers, e.g. cake, cooked rice etc. are fine, but no spicy or salty foods, or "gone off" foods. Apples, cut in half and put on a table or the ground are excellent for blackbirds and robins.

Staffordshire Wildlife Trust sells peanuts and wild bird seed throughout the year, as well as various bird feeders. They are sold from the Trust's Visitor Centre at Wolseley Bridge near Rugeley and at most of the events organised by our local groups.

You can contact the Trust to find out what's in stock, or to get a free factsheet on Wildlife Gardening or making a bird box.

Why?

People have fed birds for many years simply for their own pleasure, but there is more to it than that. The massive loss of habitat in the wider countryside has meant that birds have retreated back to where there is still food - surviving hedgerows, nature reserves and privately owned wildlife friendly areas - of which gardens form the major part.

The best wildlife gardens are those that provide a wide range of natural foods, shelter and water. But even these struggle to support the numbers of birds attracted to gardens in winter. By supplementing their diets with extra food, you are in a way, maintaining a falsely high population of birds in your garden, and once you have started feeding it would be disastrous to them if you stopped as there is simply not the wild food available.

