
Backyard Birds

Bird Feeding

Feeding can benefit wild birds and provide great bird watching opportunities from the comfort of your window or yard. The most important time to feed birds is in winter when natural food supplies become scarce. However, additional species will visit feeders during the spring and fall migrations and during summer while nesting. To keep birds coming back to your feeders in any season provide them with the following three essential elements: high-quality bird seed; fresh water for drinking and bathing; and ample cover and perching areas. Conserving and planting native plants in your landscape can also provide seasonal food and cover for wild birds.

Choosing a feeder or combination of feeders depends greatly on the types of birds you would like to attract, the space you have available, and the non-avian species that may be present in your area. Squirrels are the primary competitor for seed and can be challenging to exclude from feeders. Feeders may also attract wood rats and javelinas. Improperly stored seed can also attract mice.

Ground feeders are simple screen-bottomed trays that typically sit several inches off the ground and help to keep grain or seeds and bird droppings from coming in contact with each other. Ground feeding tables should be placed in open areas at least 10 feet from the nearest tree or shrub to give birds a chance to flee predators. Doves, juncos, sparrows, towhees, goldfinches and cardinals are all likely to visit ground feeders.

Sunflower seed tube feeders are often the best choice if you only have a single feeder. Hang the feeder at least five feet off the ground and try to position it near a window where you can observe. Sunflower seeds attract chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, goldfinches, siskins and house finches.

Suet feeders are popular with titmice, chickadees, nuthatches, woodpeckers, and other insect feeding birds. Suet is a high energy formulation of animal fat and other ingredients. Suet feeders are an excellent complement to seed feeders during winter months when insects are less abundant. They can be hung from trees or poles near other feeders. It is best to have them at least five feet above ground.

Hopper feeders keep several pounds of mixed seed dry and ready for hungry birds. Hopper feeders should be positioned on a pole about five feet off the ground and will draw all the species that tube feeders attract, along with larger birds like jays, grackles, red-winged blackbirds and cardinals.

Thistle (nyjer) feeders are designed to dispense thistle (nyjer) seed, these feeders have tiny holes that make the seed available only to small-beaked finches such as goldfinches, redpolls and pine siskins.

Hummingbird feeders require the human provider to make fresh nectar, keep excess nectar refrigerated, regularly replenish nectar, and regularly clean feeders. Hummingbirds also like nectar producing plants, particularly with red flowers, but there are many flowers of other colors with nectar that attracts hummingbirds.

Some large bags of inexpensive bird seed sold at grocery and big box stores contain a large percentage of fillers such as oats, cereal, and "mixed grains". High quality bird feeds should have a label specifying the ingredients and are usually composed of black oil sunflower seeds, striped sunflower, white proso millet, safflower, and/or raw peanuts. Ground feeding bird seed mixes which attract doves, quail, towhees, and juncos may also contain some cracked corn. Nyjer should be dispensed from a feeder that is specifically designed for it. Some vendors also sell "wasteless" bird seed blends that have the shells/hulls removed to make it less messy and 100% edible.

Keep in mind bird feeders also present potential risks to birds such as window collisions, predation, and exposure to disease. If you have multiple feeders, spread them out to prevent crowding and reduce the potential for disease transmission. Feeders and birdbaths should be cleaned twice per month to reduce avian disease transmission. In both cases, use a 9:1 water to bleach mixture (10%). Water in the birdbath should be dumped, debris brushed out, and refilled daily. Clean old seeds and hulls from the ground around feeders.

Bird Damage

While attracting birds to your yard can provide entertainment, some birds eat leaves and flowers, others peck fruit, and others peck into tree trunks and structures. Managing birds takes ingenuity and persistence.

Most bird conflicts can be resolved by modifying habitat. The most direct approach is applying exclusion techniques. Well-placed bird netting will either prevent or discourage most birds from causing damage to crops. When protecting fruit trees, try to close the netting around the trunk to avoid trapping birds inside. If the crop is valuable enough and/or the damage significant enough, it may warrant more permanent coverage. Cages can be constructed to cover individual plants, a raised bed, or more.

Frightening devices can be effective, but usually only for a short time. These include recorded distress calls, pyrotechnics (explosions), and scaring devices (streamers, owl decoys, hawk silhouettes, scare-eye balloons, scarecrows, etc.). Birds often habituate to frightening techniques. Therefore, they should only be used when damage levels are low and should be varied in placement every few days. Pyrotechnics may bother neighbors and/or require permitting.

Goldfinch damage is not uncommon in our area. Goldfinches usually focus on sunflowers where they land on a stem or leaf petiole and tear off small pieces of leaf and eat them, leaving the leaves with a lacy look. The damage is usually not detrimental to the crop. Similarly, quail are known to eat seedlings. Here, floating row cover can protect the emerging seedlings from quail.

You must remember that most bird species are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. In Arizona, the exceptions are English sparrows, European starlings, and feral pigeons (rock doves). Eurasian collared doves are also in Arizona. These four non-native bird species can be managed (lethally if necessary) without issuance of a permit. It is illegal to harm or harass all other bird species without a permit from the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Given the seriousness of committing a federal crime, managing nuisance birds absolutely requires use of integrated pest management (IPM) techniques. IPM is a stepwise process that utilizes planning and minimizes negative impacts on non-target organisms and the environment. The steps of IPM are: (1) identify the pest, (2) monitor damage until it becomes unacceptable, (3) apply multiple management strategies appropriate for the pest, (4) monitor effectiveness of the control strategies, and (5) if damage continues, repeat steps 1 through 4.

June 15, 2024

Adapted from original Backyard Gardener publications by Jeff Schalau, Agent, Agriculture & Natural Resources, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, Yavapai County

The University of Arizona is an equal opportunity, affirmative action institution. The University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or genetic information in its programs and activities.