Take care of our feathered friends in winter

Source: Kelly Jackson, UK extension horticulture agent

Winter is a hard time for birds to find natural foods like wild cherries and dogwood and holly berries. We can help by putting out feeders filled with seed, along with suet, pine cones smeared with peanut butter and even fruit halves. It will help supplement their diet and provide enough food to get them through the winter.

Most birds will eat just about anything you put out, but there are some birds who have preferred foods. If you select the foods of birds that you want to see, then you will be less likely to get nuisance birds like starlings, grackles and crows. You are better off not to buy seed mixes as they contain peanut hearts, which are attractive to starlings. You will have better success if you buy black oil-type sunflower seed and white millet separately, in bulk. These are often cheaper than seed mixes too. Black oil sunflower seed will attract most seed-eating birds. Millet will attract sparrows, cowbirds and dark-eyed juncos.

Platform feeders will accommodate most birds. They can also lead to a lot of seed loss and waste, as the birds will knock the seed around and fall to the ground. If you want to attract specific birds, choose a feeder for that type bird. Gold and house finches prefer a tube feeder with a small opening for nyjer thistle or hulled sunflower seeds.

Don’t forget that birds need water too. Keep a bird bath or water source close to feeders, and be sure the water is fresh and not frozen, as it tends to freeze in winter. Place the feeders in an open area where there are deciduous and evergreen trees, with shrubs nearby, so birds can escape for shelter.

House cats can be a problem around bird feeders as they will lay in wait to ambush the birds for a meal. If you have a cat, consider putting a collar with a bell on it, so birds can escape before being attacked.

Keep your feeders clean by periodically using hot, soapy water and a capful of bleach to remove old, dried seed. Platform feeders might hold water and should have small holes drilled into the bottom to allow water to drain.

Contact the (YOUR COUNTY) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service for information on feeding birds in winter.

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