

Put out the welcome mat for birds in winter

By Kym Pokorny
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As we begin the slide into winter and summer’s bounty recedes, birds welcome the extra nutrition offered by backyard feeders.

When putting out a banquet of supplemental food, high quality is essential, said Dana Sanchez, a wildlife specialist for Oregon State University Extension Service. Mixes with red millet, golden millet, flax seed, rape seed and oats are a waste because birds will just kick those fillers out of the feeder, where they’ll fall on the ground and attract unwanted visitors like rats. They’ll also sprout and grow into undesirable plants.

Put black oil sunflower seeds top on the list because they attract so many different bird species, Sanchez said, including chickadees, black-headed grosbeaks, house sparrows, northern flickers and song sparrows. To enjoy finches, offer their favored nyjer seed, also called thistle seed, in specialized feeders with openings small enough to hold the seed in and perfect for their tiny beaks. Many birds – waxwings, grosbeaks, chickadees and robins – love

fruit, which can be put out on elevated platform feeders.

For future bird feasts, plant a native, fruit-bearing tree or shrub. Elderberry, serviceberry, dogwood and snowberry are attractive options that are well-adapted to our region and great sources of fall food for birds.

People enjoy watching woodpeckers going at suet blocks. The fat-and-seed mixtures are best used in fall and winter when birds need the extra energy to keep warm. In warm weather suet goes bad quickly, which is not good for birds. So, if you want to use suet in summer, check it often and remove it as soon as it starts to smell.

Cleaning all bird feeders once a week is essential. Moisture contributes to mold, which causes diseases transmitted on avian feet after perching on feeders. Discard any feed left in the feeder, scrub inside and out with a long-handled brush – available in different sizes and lengths at bird shops or online – and follow with a rinse of bleach solution at a ratio of 10 percent water to 1 percent bleach. Let it dry thoroughly before filling.

How you arrange feeders

around the yard doesn’t seem to matter to birds. In patio gardens or apartments, gathering them together in groupings is usually the only option. A larger garden allows for more feeders and more areas for placement.

“You’ll notice no matter how many ports you have, there will be competitions,” Sanchez said. “It’s a matter of ‘Get off that perch; it’s mine.’ You’ll see a lot of movement around.”

Regardless of how many feeders you have and how you’ve arranged them around the yard, be sure to provide shrubs and trees for shelter from wind and predators.

“Birds at feeders are always on the lookout for danger,” Sanchez said. “There are times when you put feeders where humans can see them, but birds won’t use them if there’s not a shrub nearby. Having food somewhat close to cover is a key consideration.”

Birds need water, too. Serve it in a shallow, flat-bottomed bowl with up to one inch of water. Place it in either sun or shade, clean it often and change the water daily or at least every other day.

To reduce the chance of

rats visiting your bird stations, keep seed off the ground, Sanchez said. Choosing or modifying feeders to have a catch pan on the base can prevent most spillage from reaching the ground. If ground-feeding birds like doves, quail and juncos are a favorite, experiment with elevating a platform feeder a bit off the ground and keep the area under it cleaned up. It may or may not work. Rats might still be able to access the feeder and birds might not.

Squirrels drive some people crazy with their tenacious – and often successful – attempts to steal bird food. Others enjoy their antics and put out peanuts especially for them.

“I don’t mind them,” Sanchez said. “But some

people find themselves in conflict with squirrels. ...these voracious little animals eat a lot of expensive food.”

To thwart them, Sanchez recommends using baffles, which are half-moons of plastic that go above a feeder. Though some people insist it doesn’t work, putting feeders on a pole hanger in the middle of the lawn can stop squirrels from reaching the food. There are also feeders surrounded with cages that will fall with the weight of a squirrel and cover the feeder’s holes, but stay in place for the more lightweight birds. Check bird shops or online for these specific feeders.

Most of all, if you’re going to attract birds to the garden, don’t spray chemicals or use pelletized weed and feed or moss killer.

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