

Bird foods and feeders

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Choose the right food, select and position feeders carefully, and you'll attract a wide range of birds to your garden. It should increase their chances of survival too.

We've been feeding the birds since at least the Elizabethan era, and now half the adult population joins in, spending £250 million a year on bird food alone. Feeding birds all year round not only helps them through the shortages and cold of winter but also gets them into good breeding condition in spring and gives them more energy to forage for natural food for their offspring. Use a variety of foods to attract the widest range of birds. Ideally feed twice a day - first thing in the morning, and in the early afternoon. Once you start regular feeding, keep it up as the birds will come to depend on you. It's best to withdraw a few foods, (see below) in the breeding season as they may be unsuitable for nestlings. Remember to always store food in cool, dry conditions, out of the reach of vermin.

Bird foods

Coconuts cut in half will attract tits. Rinse out to help prevent mould. Don't feed desiccated coconut as it can lead to bloating. **Kitchen scraps** appeal to a wide range of birds. You can include bacon rinds (not salty ones), biscuit and cake crumbs, bread (don't feed bread in spring and summer), meaty bones (tie these down or large birds like crows will carry them off), grated cheese, cooked pasta, potato and rice, and raw or cooked pastry.

Fat cakes, with or without added ingredients such as seeds, are very popular. If making your own, mix the fat in a 1:3 ratio with other foods. Avoid polyunsaturated fats which are less nourishing. Fat can also be smeared on to tree branches for birds such as tree creepers that won't come to tables. Don't put out fat in spring and summer.

Fruit, fresh or dried, including apples, pears, bananas, grapes, raisins and sultanas will attract blackbirds and thrushes.

Live food such as mealworms and waxworms should be offered in a steep-sided bowl heavy enough for the birds to perch on. A favourite food of robins, it will also attract wrens, dunnocks, thrushes, blackbirds, bluetits and wintering blackcaps. The RSPB produces a leaflet on culturing your own mealworms. Contact them on 01767 680551 or www.rspb.org.uk

Niger seed (also spelled nyjer, though this is strictly a trade name) is a small, black, oil-rich seed from the annual plant *Guizotia abyssinica*, a relation of the sunflower. It's especially attractive to goldfinches and siskins, also tree sparrows and dunnocks. It's usually offered in special feeders with small port holes, but can also go on the ground or bird table.

Oats can be rolled, like porridge, or pinhead oatmeal which is broken into tiny pieces which dunnocks like.

Peanuts are best offered in a wire-

mesh feeder and will attract tits, siskins and nuthatches. Whole nuts are good in winter for shy birds like coal tits that can take them away and hide them for later, but should not be offered during spring and summer as there's a small risk nestlings may choke on them.

Peanut granules are attractive to birds such as blackbirds, robins and chaffinches that cannot peck from feeders. Nutritious peanut nibs are the small growing points sometimes removed before processing for human use as they are slightly bitter. Salted nuts are not suitable for birds. Make sure peanuts are from a reputable source to avoid the risk of poisonous aflatoxin caused by fungal contamination.

Seed mixes are suitable for most birds. The best contain plenty of flaked maize, millet, oatmeal, sunflower seeds and peanut granules. Avoid cheap mixes that are mainly cereal with little variety unless you are aiming to attract pigeons and pheasants.

Sunflower seeds are particularly favoured by finches. The best value are black sunflower seeds - the stripy ones contain less oil. Even better are sunflower hearts, with the husks already removed, but they are less weather resistant.

Bird tables and feeders

Feeders and tables should be sited so that there is cover from trees, climbers or tall shrubs within 1-2m for birds to escape to, but away

from undergrowth where cats could hide. Having more than one feeding station prevents one aggressive individual hogging all the food.

When choosing a table, the best guideline is to keep it simple. Avoid fancy tables that are hard to clean or incorporate nest boxes that will never be used. All you need is a flat, easily cleaned and drained surface with a lip to retain the food - exterior plywood with a few drainage holes drilled through is ideal. 30cm x 50cm is a good size; smaller tables result in a lot of squabbling. A roof will keep off snow, but won't generally keep food dry, or deter larger birds as is sometimes hoped. It may even put off smaller, shyer birds as it restricts their all-round vision. The table can be supported by a free-standing pole, attached to a wall or fence, or hung from a suitable branch. Baffles or other physical barriers on the pole or supporting chains will help deter squirrels, or tables can be caged, which will also keep off larger birds. A table on short legs will attract ground-feeding birds.

Bird tables bring birds together in unnaturally large numbers and can be a focus for infection by salmonella and *E.coli*. Once a fortnight clear away any unused food and scrub the table with a weak solution of bleach then rinse well. The first signs of infection include green droppings and distressed, listless birds with ruffled feathers. If you notice these symptoms, scrub the table daily. Moving the table a short distance from time to time is also a useful precaution.

Types of feeder

Plastic tubes for sunflower seeds or seed mixes designed for feeders. Choose metal fittings if you have problems with squirrels.

Niger seed feeders are similar but have very small port holes to retain

the smaller seeds.

Wire mesh feeders for peanuts prevent birds taking whole nuts that could choke nestlings.

Bells for fat - you can refill these yourself once empty.

Hoppers with trays can be easier for less agile birds to use. There are designs for standing on the ground, and for hanging.

Mesh cages to hold fat cakes.

Never offer food in plastic mesh bags as these can trap birds feet and tongues.

Food and feeder suppliers

The Bird Table

Laindon Road, Hornden-on-the-Hill,
Essex SS17 8QB
01268 413109
www.thebirdtable.co.uk
Food, feeders and tables.

Ernest Charles

FREEPOST, Copplestone,
Credon, Devon EX17 2YZ
0800 7316770
www.ernest-charles.com
Food, live food, feeders & tables.

CJ Wildbird Foods Ltd

The Rea, Upton Magna,
Shrewsbury SY4 4UR
0800 731 2820
www.birdfood.co.uk
Food, live food, feeders & tables.

David's Wild Bird Feeds

The Forge, 41 High Street, Brampton,
Cambs PE28 4TG
01480 434389
www.wildbirdfeeds.com
Food and feeders.

Ferndale Lodge

Woodview Road, Paignton,
Devon TQ4 7NG
0844 3140043
www.ferndale-lodge.co.uk
Food, feeders and tables.

Field & Garden

Springfields, Castle Road, Wormegay,
King's Lynn,
Norfolk PE33 0SG
01553 844055
www.fieldandgarden.co.uk
Food, live food, feeders & tables.

Garden Bird Supplies Limited

Saxon House, 27 Duke Street,
Chelmsford, Essex CM1 1HT
0870 8998989
www.gardenbird.com
Food, live food, feeders & tables.

Green Gardener

Brook Hill, Brundall Road,
Blofield NR13 4LB
01603 715096
www.greengardener.co.uk
Food, live food, feeders & tables.

J.E. Haith Ltd

Park Street, Cleethorpes,
Lincolnshire DN35 7NF
0800 2987054
www.haiths.com
Food, live food, feeders & tables.

Jacobi Jayne & Company

Living with Birds, Freepost 1155,
Herne Bay CT6 7BR
0800 072 0130
www.jacobijayne.com
Food, live food, feeders & tables.

Queenswood Garden Products

Unit 4 Southern Avenue,
Leominster HR6 0QF
01568 611281
www.queenswood.co.uk
Food, feeders, tables.

RSPB

RSPB Sales Customer Care,
PO Box 280, Wetherby,
W Yorkshire LS23 7XJ
0845 1 200501
www.rspbshop.co.uk
Food, feeders, tables.

Soar Mill Seeds Limited

Southdown Farm, Malborough,
Kingsbridge, Devon TQ7 3DU
0845 330 8908
www.soarmillseeds.co.uk
Food, live food, feeders & tables.

Thompson & Morgan UK Ltd

Poplar Lane, Ipswich,
Suffolk IP8 3BU
01473 688821
www.thompson-morgan.com
Food, feeders & tables.

Wildlife World

Manor Farm Barn, Chavenage,
Tetbury, Gloucestershire GL8 8XW
0870 7572233
www.wildlifeworld.co.uk
Food, feeders & tables.