

Bird problems

Although most birds are welcome garden visitors, and many help the gardener by eating a wide range of pests and weed seeds, some can also cause a variety of damage.

Q What sort of damage do birds cause?

A Birds can be responsible for a wide range of damage, some serious, some just annoying. In autumn and winter they eat flower buds, strip ornamental berries, and attack brassicas. In spring they can destroy flowers, steal seeds and damage seedlings when dust-bathing. Summer damage includes taking fruit and pecking holes in turf.

Q Which birds eat flower buds?

A Bullfinches are the master criminals in this respect, but hawfinches, chaffinches, greenfinches, sparrows and tits are also culprits in some areas. Fruit trees, and ornamental trees and bushes, may be stripped of their dormant buds by birds in cold weather when other foods are scarce. Likely victims are almonds, flowering cherries, crab apples, lilacs, magnolias, rhododendrons and wisteria, as well as fruit trees. Large buds, like those found on magnolias for example, may be pecked rather than stripped off. The blooms will often open but they will be disfigured.

Ideally, grow fruit in a fruit cage that can be covered with netting in winter before the damage starts. Later, this will

keep birds off the ripening fruit. A cage can be costly and is not practical for large trees. Visual deterrents (see below) are the only alternative. The deterrents should be changed and moved frequently to avoid birds getting accustomed to them.

Q Which birds strip shrubs off berries?

A Blackbirds and thrushes feast on autumn berries and fruits, and are sometimes joined by jays and pigeons. Cotoneaster, berberis, ilex, pyracantha and sorbus can all be stripped. Only netting will keep hungry birds off these berries.

Q Which birds strip flowers?

A Tits searching for sweet nectar will peck camellias, sweet peas and rhododendrons. The most annoying damage is done by sparrows; they shred the flowers of spring plants like sweet peas, violets, polyanthus and crocus. The birds don't seem to eat the flowers. Protect vulnerable plants with netting. Dark-coloured netting is less intrusive but more hazardous to birds as they cannot see it and may become entangled.

Q Which birds eat fruit and vegetables?

A Embryo fruits are grazed by bullfinches and ripe fruit is attacked by tits, starlings, pigeons, collared doves, blackbirds and thrushes. Peas, beans and sweetcorn are eaten by jays. Leafy vegetables are attractive to wood pigeons and collared doves, especially in winter when their favourite foods such as clover are unavailable. In fact, growing clover between your winter brassicas may entice birds to eat this, rather than your precious crop. The clover will generally recover and can be dug in later in the year.

A temporary covering of netting over low-growing plants should do the job, but remember that pigeons, collared doves and other large birds can do serious damage quickly, so act as soon as you see damage being done.

Q Which birds raid seedbeds and peck young plants?

A Newly sown lawns and other seed beds are raided by seed-eaters such as sparrows which can damage large quantities of seed. Even indoor seeds in greenhouses are not safe. If the seeds have been neatly dug out, mice are the likely culprits.

Sparrows are the main

seedbed bathers. Young seedlings are grazed by larks, sparrows and pheasants.

Low-growing plants and seedbeds can be protected by covering them with horticultural fleece. This will keep off birds and should boost the plants' growth so they grow out of the vulnerable stage more quickly.

Q Which birds feed in turf?

A Large birds in search of soil insects like ants, chafer grubs or leatherjackets, can make holes in turf. Blackbirds, crows, rooks, starlings, green woodpeckers and magpies are the birds usually responsible. Serious damage is more likely to be the work of badgers, foxes or squirrels seeking or burying food.

If you reduce the insect population in the turf, you may lessen the damage caused by birds. Leatherjackets, a common insect pest of turf, can be forced to the surface by watering the lawn with a dilute solution of washing-up liquid or mild disinfectant. If only a small area is affected, you can soak the ground with water and cover it with a sheet of black polythene.

Leatherjackets are grey-brown, legless grubs, up to 5cm long. Either sweep them off the lawn, or leave them for the birds. On larger areas, try treating the grass with biological controls for chafer grubs when the soil is warm - in April or May. There are no chemicals available to kill soil insects.

Q Which areas of the garden are most at risk from birds?

A Bird damage is most likely near trees, bushes and hedges. It is less likely in areas where there is

not much vegetation. Pigeons are an exception. They will search out vegetation anywhere in winter, and are especially numerous where oilseed rape is grown.

Many birds are very shy and avoid people, so planting flowering or fruiting trees near the house may help protect them.

Q Can I control the birds in my garden?

A Birds are protected by law, so only specially trained and licensed people are able to control them.

Noisy deterrents are only suitable if you live a good distance from other people. These devices are very intrusive and need to go off around dawn, when birds are actively feeding. One exception is a humming tape, which makes relatively little noise. Birds get used to noise deterrents, however, and eventually ignore them.

The traditional remedy of threading black or other cotton over vulnerable plants is not recommended these days as birds can easily get entangled. Coloured threads also spoil the appearance of ornamental plants.

Q What can you do about birds?

A Visual deterrents like flapping, reflective scarers, toy cats, hawk replicas or scarecrows may work for a while, but birds soon become accustomed to them.

Netting vulnerable plants works well if the plants are small enough. Don't leave any gaps in the netting. You should check the netting at least twice a day in case a bird has become entangled. Using brightly coloured netting and keeping it taut will help reduce the risk of this happening.

Wire chicken netting is a more costly but longer-lasting solution. It is also tangle-proof. Use a 2cm net to exclude small birds and the cheaper 6.5cm net to keep out pigeons and other larger birds.

Q Is there anything I can spray on to deter birds?

A There are many repellents on the market that claim to deter birds - *Gardening Which?* has not yet tested these claims. In *Gardening Which?* members' trials the results have been inconclusive.

Q How can I encourage birds into my garden, without getting damaged plants?

A Encourage insect-eating birds such as robins and blue tits by putting out food and putting up nesting boxes. In return, they will help keep down the insect pest population in your garden.

Q Will feeding birds encourage damage in the garden?

A It appears that feeding birds may give them more time and energy to do damage. However, most people feed birds, and hope for the best.

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