

FEEDING BIRDS

What food can you leave out for birds and how can you keep your feeding station hygienic and pest-free?

Here you'll find the answers to all your bird feeding questions.

Feeding birds in the garden is a popular activity - over half of adults in the UK feed birds in their garden. That's a lot of extra help for the birds! Providing birds with supplementary food will bring them closer for you to marvel at their fascinating behaviour and wonderful colours. It will also reward them for sharing their lives with you. Feeding birds is also an ideal way to enthuse children about wildlife.

Supplementary feeding can't provide all the natural proteins and vitamins that adult and young birds need, so it's important to create and manage your garden to provide a source of natural foods as well, through well-managed lawns, shrub and flowerbeds. If you provide both natural and supplementary food, your garden will be visited year-round by a host of different birds.

It is important to feed your garden birds responsibly and safely. By following a few simple guidelines, you can play a valuable role in helping your local birds overcome periods of natural food shortage, survive periods of severe winter weather and come into good breeding condition in the spring.

Frequently asked questions

What food is best for birds?

Different birds need different foods to sustain them. If you supply a variety of food you are more likely attract many species.

Household scraps such as pastry, cooked rice and breadcrumbs are enjoyed by many garden birds. Fruit, especially bruised apples and pears, will be popular with thrushes and blackbirds.

When you are buying bird food, try to get a good mix of peanuts, seeds and live food such as mealworms and waxworms. Then you should have something to offer all the birds. Good ready-made mixes should contain sunflower seeds, broken peanuts, flaked maize and smaller seeds such as millet.

What are the best foods to put out for birds during the cold winter weather?

During cold spells your supply of food can save the lives of birds. Make sure you put out food and water on a regular basis. In severe weather, feed twice daily if possible, in the morning and in the early afternoon.

Bird cake and food bars are very good because of their high-fat content, as are peanuts. Bird seed mixtures are also high in oils. You can also feed kitchen scraps, such as fat and suet, mild grated cheese, cooked potatoes, pastry and dried fruit.

Can I put out salted peanuts for the birds?

No - most garden birds cannot process salt and will die if they are given too much. It's best to avoid offering garden birds any foods that contain lots of salt including salted peanuts, salty bacon, chips and crisps.

Is it okay to feed peanuts to birds during the breeding season?

It is important during the breeding season to only put out peanuts in metal mesh feeders. This means that birds cannot take whole nuts, which can choke young birds. It is also important not to use nylon mesh bags, as these can trap birds' feet.

Are mealworms a good food for birds?

Mealworms are full of nutrition and are excellent food for insect-eating birds such as robins, blue tits, wrens and pied wagtails. You can feed them to the birds all year round. In very cold or very dry weather when birds struggle to find worms, insects and spiders in hard ground, mealworms make a good alternative for them.

Where is the best place to put a birdtable in my garden?

Birdtables should be placed where the birds are safe and will be able to feed undisturbed. Avoid putting them near fences or dense hedges, where cats can easily get to them. If there is a small bush nearby, birds can use this as a look-out point to make sure it is safe.

And don't forget to make sure it is visible from a window so you can enjoy watching the birds as they feed.

What can I use to treat a birdtable?

It is best for the birds if you leave a birdtable untreated. However, it will last longer if you treat it. Water-based preservatives, such as Fenceguard or Sadolin, are less toxic and will not affect the food you put out. The preservative should be thoroughly dry before you use the table for feeding.

Should I supply drinking water for my garden birds?

It is good to provide a regular supply of clean water for birds to drink and bathe in.

Water is particularly important during the winter when natural supplies may be frozen, and in dry weather. Shallow containers, like dustbin lids or plant saucers, work well, but make sure you clean them regularly to prevent diseases from spreading.

It's summer, why have the birds suddenly vanished from my garden?

This is a question that is regularly asked in the summer. Unless you are finding dead birds, then there is really nothing to worry about. In late summer, birds are nearing the end of a period of hectic activity: the breeding season.

Many of them will go through a period of moult to renew worn or juvenile plumage. While they are losing their flight feathers, they are vulnerable, so conceal themselves from predators.

They seldom sing, and no longer need to defend territory, so seem to disappear. Late summer and early autumn is also a time of plenty for birds. The natural food supply is abundant. Birds will move from their breeding areas into farmland, orchards or woodland for instance, to feed on grain, berries and weed seed.

They can be absent from gardens until we get the first autumn frosts so late summer is a good time to clean feeders and bird tables, ready for the birds' return. A 10% disinfectant solution is suitable but thoroughly rinse any feeders before using them again.

Water containers should be scrubbed out, and wooden tables can be treated with a water-based preservative to protect them. Consider hanging the feeders and placing the bird table in different areas and do ensure that they are cleaned regularly. This will help to reduce the spread of disease amongst the birds visiting your feeding station.