

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.

What Food to provide

We receive numerous enquiries about what and how to feed garden birds. Many of them relate to the best type of food to provide, or whether particular foods are suitable for birds or not. This page shows you what to feed your garden birds - and what to avoid.

Bird seed mixtures

There are different mixes for feeders and for birdtables and ground feeding. The better mixtures contain plenty of flaked maize, sunflower seeds, and peanut granules.

Small seeds, such as millet, attract mostly house sparrows, dunnocks, finches, reed buntings and collared doves, while flaked maize is taken readily by blackbirds. Tits and greenfinches favour peanuts and sunflower seeds. Mixes that contain chunks or whole nuts are suitable for winter feeding only. Pinhead oatmeal is excellent for many birds. Wheat and barley grains are often included in seed mixtures, but they are really only suitable for pigeons, doves and pheasants, which feed on the ground and rapidly increase in numbers, frequently deterring the smaller species.

Avoid seed mixtures that have split peas, beans, dried rice or lentils as again only the large species can eat them dry. These are added to some cheaper seed mixes to bulk them up. Any mixture containing green or pink lumps should also be avoided as these are dog biscuit, which can only be eaten when soaked.

Black sunflower seeds

These are an excellent year-round food, and in many areas are even more popular than peanuts. The oil content is higher in black than striped ones, and so they are much better. Sunflower hearts (the husked kernels) are a popular no-mess food.

Nyjer seeds

These are small and black with a high oil content. They need a special type of seed feeder, and are particular favourites with goldfinches and siskins.

Peanuts

These are rich in fat and are popular with tits, greenfinches, house sparrows, nuthatches, great spotted woodpeckers and siskins. Crushed or grated nuts attract robins, dunnocks and even wrens. Nuthatches and coal tits may hoard peanuts. Salted or dry roasted peanuts should not be used. Peanuts can be high in a natural toxin, which can kill birds, so buy from a reputable dealer, such as our online shop.

Bird cake and food bars

Fat balls and other fat-based food bars are excellent winter food. If they are sold in nylon mesh bags, always remove the bag before putting the fat ball out – the soft mesh can trap and injure birds. You can make your own bird cake by pouring melted fat (suet or lard) onto a mixture of ingredients such as seeds, nuts, dried fruit, oatmeal, cheese and cake. Use about one-third fat to two-thirds mixture. Stir well in a bowl and allow it to set in a container of your choice. An empty coconut shell, plastic cup or tit bell makes an ideal bird cake 'feeder'. Alternatively, you can turn it out onto your birdtable when solid.

Live foods and other insect foods

Mealworms are relished by robins and blue tits, and may attract other insect-eating birds such as pied wagtails.

Mealworms are a natural food and can be used to feed birds throughout the year. It can become quite expensive to constantly buy mealworms, and many people want to grow their own. You can culture your own mealworms (click on the link to the left). If you cannot face this performance, buy your mealworms from the professionals, consoling yourself with the thought that successful mealworm breeding is even more difficult than it sounds. It is very important that any mealworms fed to birds are fresh. Any dead or discoloured ones must not be used as they can cause problems such as salmonella poisoning.

Insect food appropriately offered can attract treecreepers and wrens.

Cooking fat

Fat from cooking is bad for birds. The problem with cooked fat from roasting tins and dishes is that the meat juices have blended with the fat and when allowed to set, this consistency makes it prone to smearing, not good for birds' feathers. It is a breeding ground for bacteria, so potentially bad for birds' health. Salt levels depend on what meat is used and if any salt is added during cooking. Lard and beef suet on their own are fine as they re-solidify after warming and as they are pure fat, it is not as suitable for bacteria to breed on.

Polyunsaturated margarines or vegetable oils

These are unsuitable for birds. Unlike humans, birds need high levels of saturated fat, such as raw suet and lard. They need the high energy content to keep warm in the worst of the winter weather, since their body reserves are quickly used up, particularly on cold winter nights. The soft fats can easily be smeared onto the feathers, destroying the waterproofing and insulating qualities.

Dog and cat food

Meaty tinned dog and cat food form an acceptable substitute to earthworms during the warm, dry part of the summer when worms are beyond the birds' reach. Blackbirds readily take dog food, and even feed it to their chicks.

Dry biscuits are not recommended as birds may choke on the hard lumps. It is sometimes added to cheaper seed mixtures for bulk. Soaked dog biscuit is excellent, except in hot weather as it quickly dries out. Petfood can attract larger birds such as magpies and gulls, and also neighbourhood cats. If this is likely to be a problem, it is best avoided.

Milk and coconut

Never give milk to any bird. A bird's gut is not designed to digest milk and it can result in serious stomach upsets, or even death. Birds can, however, digest fermented dairy products such as cheese. Mild grated cheese can be a good way of attracting robins, wrens and dunnocks.

Give fresh coconut only, in the shell. Rinse out any residues of the sweet coconut water from the middle of the coconut before hanging it out to prevent the build-up of black mildew.

Desiccated coconut should never be used as it may swell once inside a bird and cause death.

Rice and cereals

Cooked rice, brown or white (without salt added) is beneficial and readily accepted by all species during severe winter weather. Uncooked rice may be eaten by birds such as pigeons, doves and pheasants but is less likely to attract other species.

Porridge oats must never be cooked, since this makes them glutinous and could harden around a bird's beak. Uncooked porridge oats are readily taken by a number of bird species.

Any breakfast cereal is acceptable birdfood, although you need to be careful only to put out small quantities at a time. It is best offered dry, with a supply of drinking water nearby, since it quickly turns into pulp once wetted.

Mouldy and stale food

Many moulds are harmless, but some that can cause respiratory infections in birds, and so it is best to be cautious and avoid mouldy food entirely.

If food turns mouldy or stale on your birdtable, you are probably placing out too large a quantity for the birds to eat in one day. Always remove any stale or mouldy food promptly. Stale food provides a breeding ground for salmonella bacteria, which can cause food poisoning. At least one type of salmonella causes death among such species as greenfinches and house sparrows. Large quantities of food scattered on the ground may attract rats and mice. Rats can carry diseases that affect humans.