

How to: Provide food for birds



Photo: Steve Head



Photo: Matt MacGillivray via Wikimedia Commons

As our guide ‘How to: Improve your garden for birds’ points out, the most important food for birds is what they find naturally in the garden. For adults this includes seeds, berries, fruit and invertebrates. During the nesting period, the caterpillars, spiders and other wildlife birds can catch in your garden are vital for feeding the nestlings, which is why avoiding insecticides is so important!

*This guide covers issues about **supplementary feeding** – when we put out food items for garden birds to help them, but also to lure them to where we can see them easily. Feeding birds is generally a good thing – but only with proper precautions.*

Target species

Nearly all garden birds will be attracted by supplementary feed, but different species prefer different food and different types of feeder. Tits, some finches, great spotted woodpecker and starlings will come to suspended feeders, while house sparrows, pigeons, blackbirds, thrushes, dunnocks and crows are ground feeders, but often will use bird tables.

How to do it

- Get to know what type of food each bird likes, and how they need it presented

Species	Feeder type and food preferred
Blue tit	Suspended, Peanuts, sunflower seeds
Woodpigeon	Ground feeder, Sunflower hearts, grain, cake and biscuit crumbs
Blackbird	Ground or bird table, seeds, raisins, fruit
Robin	Ground or bird table, mealworms, fat
Great tit	Suspended, sunflower seeds, peanuts
Dunnock	Ground feeder, mealworms, suet pellets, seeds in winter
House sparrow	Bird table, sunflower seeds, crushed peanuts
Goldfinch	Suspended, nyjer seed, sunflower hearts
Magpie	Occasional at bird table, cake crumbs, suet, seeds

Collared dove	Ground feeder, sunflower hearts
Chaffinch	Prefer ground feeding. sunflower hearts, oily seeds
Coal tit	Suspended, peanuts, sunflower seeds
Starling	Ground and suspended feeder, sunflower seed, fat, bread
Jackdaw	Ground and suspended, peanuts
Greenfinch	Suspended, sunflower hearts, peanuts
Wren	Ground feeder, mealworms, crushed peanuts
Long-tailed tit	Suspended, peanuts, fat, sunflower seeds
Carrion Crow	Ground/bird table, cake, biscuit crumbs, omnivorous!
Great spotted woodpecker	Suspended, peanuts, sunflower hearts, fat

- For all feeding techniques, provide food often but in small quantities, so it gets finished quickly and doesn't hang around to get mouldy. This also reduces the risk of passing on infections.
- You need to remove any soggy food including germinating seeds, so all feeders should be protected from rain and/or have drainage capability

Suspended feeders

- There are countless variants of these on sale, many designed to appeal to humans more than for their efficiency for birds.
- Peanut feeders have a tubular shape, and the walls are made of metal mesh that will retain whole nuts, while being open enough for birds to peck at them and remove small pieces of nut. The mesh generally allows small birds to hang on without trapping their toes.
- Seed feeders are plastic and metal structures with two or more small holes (with perches) so birds can remove seeds without all the seeds pouring out. They are ideal for grains, sunflower hearts and most commercial bird seed mixes. You can get special feeders for tiny nyger (niger) seeds beloved by goldfinches. These are tubes with particularly small access holes and can't be used for larger seeds.
- Fat balls containing suet and seeds are a good energy source in winter. They can be put in a suitable feeder. Beware fat balls in a plastic mesh holder – birds can get caught up in these.



Four types of suspended feeder, from left: a fat ball holder, a wooden peanut feeder, a feeder for mealworms or suet pellets and a typical seed-feeder.

Photo: Steve Head

Bird tables



Photo: Steve Head

Classic bird tables are flat structures raised about 1.5m above the ground. They are generally wooden, have low walls to stop food blowing away, and often have a rustic wooden roof structure to keep rain off. They are used by many smaller ground-feeding birds such as blackbirds, robins and house sparrows. They don't drain very well, and mouldy food can accumulate, so they need regular cleaning

Bird tables are generally accessible by squirrels and unfortunately, often by cats so should be sited away from ground cover



Photo: Karelj, via Wikimedia Commons



Ground feeders

- These are tables about 20-40 cm square, set on legs to be 10-15cm above the ground. They can have metal or wood frames and have a micro-mesh metal surface that drains water but does not trap bird's feet. They are ideal for birds that prefer to feed from the ground such as robins, blackbirds and doves

Photo: Steve Head

How easy is it to do?

It is very easy to put up feeders, but once up they need regular cleaning

How much will it cost?

Suspended feeders cost from £8 to £25, with a little extra for "squirrel-proof" models. Bird tables can be made at home – see the RSPB [advice sheet](#), or bought commercially for £50. Beware spindly-legged cheap versions which blow over. Ground feeders cost £10-£15.

Bird seed mixes cost about £0.75 to £5 per kilo, and buying in bulk makes a big saving. Sunflower hearts in bulk are about £1.50 per kilo, and dried mealworms about £5 per litre.

How effective is it for the target species?

Very effective at bringing birds close to the house so you can easily watch them. Bird feeding is beneficial to the populations of many birds, but there are concerns it is causing significant ecological changes.

Golden rules, what the science tells us

- Feed birds throughout the year, not just in the winter. Parents work flat-out in the nesting season to feed their chicks on insects, and the extra food you can give the adults is a great help.
- Peanuts should never be fed whole to birds unless confined within feeders so they have to peck bits off. Whole peanuts can choke small and greedy birds, so crush peanuts if used on bird tables.

- There are several unpleasant diseases which have recently become common in garden birds and are spread by contact with feeders, when a bird picks up the disease when and infected individual has been there earlier. Below are two of the most important
- [Trichomonosis](#) is caused by a single-celled parasite, and well known in pigeons as “canker”. Recently it has spread to greenfinches, chaffinches and less often to other garden birds. It damages the throat of birds, making swallowing difficult. Diseased birds are emaciated and lethargic and the populations of both finches have dropped markedly
- [Avian pox](#) is caused by a virus, and exists sporadically in several species, but causes particular problems to great tits which develop tumour-like growths, which while not usually fatal reduce the bird’s condition and increases mortality
- It is very important that all bird feeders are kept hygienic through regular emptying of uneaten food, and cleaning with a brush and mild bleach.
- If you see signs of diseased birds on your feeders, empty and clean them and **stop using** them for a couple of weeks to break the chain of infection
- Birds are easily disturbed, so feeders should be placed somewhere quiet, in the open and not near branches or fences from which cats could leap.
- Supplementary bird feeding is having a significant effect on British bird populations. Those species that come to feeders (and are aggressive and dominant) are doing well, possibly to the detriment of more timid and subordinate species which don’t. Feeding has contributed to evolutionary and behavioural change in blackcap warblers which can more readily spend the winter in Britain. On balance the advice is to keep feeding, because all birds need help

What to look for

- Activity on your feeders. If they don’t bring in birds, you may need to move them to a quieter place.
- Any signs of disease in your visitors
- If you are digging in the garden look out for apparently very tame robins, that will watch your activities and dash in to pick up the worms and insects revealed.
- You will find ground-feeding birds foraging for spilled food from tables and suspended feeders.



Fallen and over-ripe fruit like these pears are popular with winter thrushes – and this red admiral butterfly

Photo: J.M. Staines

Things to be aware of

- Never feed cured or salted food such as bacon or salted peanuts. Suet or hard animal fat is good, butter will melt and damage their feathers
- Peanuts can be contaminated by fungal poisons called aflatoxins which are much more dangerous to birds than to humans. Only feed birds on certified aflatoxin-free peanuts
- Some bird tables are combined with nest boxes. This is a bad idea, because nesting birds need privacy with no disturbance

- Some seed feeders are tall with 4-10 more feeding holes. These should be avoided since they can cause squabbles over access, and because they take too long to empty, increasing the risk of disease spread.
- Ground feeders are open to access by squirrels, other rodents and larger birds like pigeons that some people resent feeding! You can buy metal cages that can be placed over them in the hope of excluding robbers.
- If you pick caterpillars or weevils off your vegetables and flowers, put them on the bird table or ground feeder, where they will be greatly appreciated.

Further information

How to: Improve your [garden for birds](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_birds.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_birds.pdf

How to: Bring [water into your garden](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_bring_water.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_bring_water.pdf

RSPB make a [bird table](http://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-birds/feeding-birds/all-about-bird-tables/making-a-bird-table/) www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-birds/feeding-birds/all-about-bird-tables/making-a-bird-table/

Trichomonosis [guidance](http://www.gardenwildlifehealth.org/portfolio/trichomonosis-in-garden-birds/) www.gardenwildlifehealth.org/portfolio/trichomonosis-in-garden-birds/

Avian pox [guidance](http://www.gardenwildlifehealth.org/portfolio/avian-pox-in-garden-birds/) www.gardenwildlifehealth.org/portfolio/avian-pox-in-garden-birds/

Possible [negative aspects](#) of feeding Shutt, J.D. and Lees, A.C. (2021). Killing with kindness: Does widespread generalised provisioning of wildlife help or hinder biodiversity conservation efforts? doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2021.109295

Blackcaps [and feeding](#) Plummer, K.E. et al (2015) Is supplementary feeding in gardens a driver of evolutionary change in a migratory bird species? doi.org/10.1111/gcb.13070