

Feeding Garden Birds

As our climate changes, gardens are becoming even more vital to wildlife and people. They can provide shade, absorb carbon, soak up flood water and help to cool buildings. A well managed network of gardens stretching across the Sussex would also help wildlife to move more freely and adapt to climate change enabling us to create a living landscape.

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Wildlife Friendly: Gardens can easily support families of blue tit, great tit, robin, wren and blackbird. The fuss around your bird table might attract the interest of others including greater spotted woodpecker, long tailed tit, greenfinch, tree creeper and other normally shy birds.



Reed bunting / Paul Marten

Climate Friendly: By supplementary feeding garden birds at the appropriate times of year you can help to ensure your garden offers sufficient food sources to help birds. By providing a garden with food, water and shelter in a neighbourhood it creates essential corridors for wildlife to move and adapt to climate change.

Why feed and house birds?

Over the past 50 years, many 'common' birds have dramatically declined. No-one knows for sure the reasons for this, but changing agricultural practices and a lack of food in the summer and winter have taken their toll. Sometimes when we look out of the window into our gardens, it is difficult to believe that song thrushes, sparrows and starlings are all struggling to survive in the countryside, but they are. These among many others are now red listed as species of extreme concern. Feeding birds in summer and winter can really help. In winter, food is hard to find, and supplementing birds' feeding can be indispensable to survival. In the spring, adults are busy trying to raise chicks. Not only do they need to hunt all day to find the right food for their chicks, they also need to feed themselves. A well-fed parent is better able to gather food for its chicks.

Remember, if you decide to feed birds, do so regularly. If you stop feeding in the summer, tail off gradually, to give birds time to adjust.

What types of feeders are out there?

There are many ways to feed birds, as outlined below remember that different bird species like different food types.

- ◆ **Bird Tables.** These can be freestanding or hung from a tree. Put out seeds, chopped apples, cereal, bacon rind, biscuit crumbs, raisins, cooked potato or hardened fat.
- ◆ **Fat Balls.** There are three kinds: seed balls, peanut balls and insect balls. The fat and insect balls have a small proportion of insects in, and is suitable for insect eaters which used to migrate south in winter, but which may now overwinter in the UK.
- ◆ **Feeders.** These come in a variety of styles and colours. Different colours have been shown to attract different species of birds.



Bird table

Mesh Feeders are used for dispensing peanuts. This is the safest way for birds to eat peanuts, and is essential during the breeding season. Fledgling birds will choke on whole peanuts. A mesh feeder ensures that birds will only get a small piece of peanut at one time. These come in a variety of shapes and sizes – housed in wood, metal, or plastic. Mesh feeders with red at either end will attract Woodpeckers and Siskins (though these are rare feeders).

Seed tubes with a green top and bottom, and filled with black sunflower seeds will attract goldfinches and greenfinches.

Clear seed tubes with mixed sunflower seeds will attract greenfinches and sparrows. Sparrows are selective and quite likely to prefer black seeds to striped seeds – for the good reason that in black sunflower seeds, the kernel forms a much higher proportion of the weight.



Blue tit / Darin Smith



Siskin / Paul Marten



Clear tube feeder / Maddy Davidson

If you want to supplement the diet of insect feeders (such as robins and wrens), you can do so by giving them mealworms, which you can get from most garden centres. Do not give them angler's maggots, as these may contain salmonella.

None of these alone provides a complete well-balanced diet. The aim is to provide a supplement to the birds' natural diet rather than a complete alternative.

How much food should I put out?

Amounts provided should allow for rapid turnover to reduce the chance of food becoming mouldy or contaminated.

What plants offer a good food source for birds?

Birds will be attracted to many garden plants for their seeds, berries, and shelter. Plants will also be hosts to many insects. You don't need to plant a specific area for birds unless you want to watch them in one place.

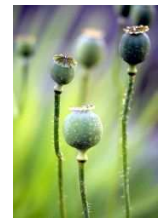
- ◆ **Berries.** Birds are most attracted to berries as they provide valuable food during the winter – if they stay on the tree long enough! Trees and shrubs with berries on include:



Holly berries / Alan Price

<i>Amelanchier lamarckii</i>	<i>Cotoneaster</i>	<i>Hollies</i>	<i>Sambucus</i> (do not prune hard)
<i>Arbutus unedo</i>	<i>Daphne mezereum</i>	<i>Mahonia</i>	<i>Skimmia</i>
<i>Berberis</i>	<i>Eleagnus</i>	<i>Malus</i>	<i>Sorbus</i>
<i>Cornus mas</i>	<i>Hippophae</i>	<i>Pyracantha</i>	<i>Viburnum</i>

- ◆ **Seeds.** These will also be source of food throughout the winter. Needless to say, the seed heads must be left to ripen. Good seed plants include: artichokes, marigolds, poppies, sunflowers, teasels and thistles.



Poppy / Alan Price, Gatehouse

Water everywhere but not a drop to drink.

Gardens can be made more attractive to birds by the addition of water. If you do not have a bird bath or shallow area in your pond, use an upside down plastic bin lid or large plant pot saucer. Keep it topped up, free of ice and clean to stop the spread of diseases like salmonella.

Keep it clean

Common diseases of garden birds are spread by contamination of food with the droppings or saliva of infected birds. The risk increases when many birds feed at the same places day after day for long periods. To minimise the risks:

- ◆ Use several feeding sites, to reduce numbers at any one place
- ◆ 'Rotate' between feeding sites, so not all are in constant use — rest periods will help to reduce infection levels
- ◆ Clean and disinfect feeders/feeding sites regularly, especially in the months January to May. Rinse and air-dry feeders before re-use
- ◆ Maintain careful personal hygiene Brushes and equipment used for cleaning bird feeders, tables and baths should not be used for other purposes and should be kept and used outside. Rubber gloves should be worn and hands should be washed afterwards

To find out more about helping wildlife in your garden including how to make a bird box why not visit [WildCall Wildlife Gardening](#) pages for more information