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News Release

## **Bird Feeding in Winter**

**Question:** What advice can you give about feeding and attracting birds during the winter months?

**Answer:** The birds may prefer to come inside and eat with you after this week's weather. Bird feeding is generally believed to be a winter activity, but it really can be a year-round hobby. Fewer birds will use feeders in summer, but those species that do will reward their human hosts by bringing their new off-spring to the feeders, too. The pleasure of seeing a young chickadee begging for food from its parents will make summer feeding well worth the effort. However, winter feeding is probably more appreciated by the birds than summer feeding. This is especially true of those species that would normally migrate further south but instead stop briefly here in areas with feeding stations. So, in all fairness to the birds, fall and winter feeding, once begun, should not end until well into the spring months when other food sources are plentiful or until the birds have begun to migrate to northern breeding areas.

Many different seed feeders are available and should be chosen according to the birds you wish to attract. Basic platform feeders are favorites because they generally hold a lot of seeds and provide a perching area for several birds at a time. Covered platform feeders are recommended because they protect the food from rain or snow.

Many types of hanging feeders, including tube feeders and bowl feeders, are also available. Hanging feeders, especially those with small perches, attract more of the smaller songbirds and will be used less frequently by larger birds, like cardinals and jays, that rarely feed on swaying feeders.

Regardless of the type of seed or mix used, feeders should be cleaned regularly with hot water and detergent. All wet or moldy food should be removed immediately from feeders and from the area near the feeder. Moldy food can poison the birds.

Many species of birds not attracted to seed feeders will be drawn to suet feeders. Suet, a hard type of beef fat which can be obtained from your butcher, provides birds with a high-energy winter food. Suet will attract birds that normally eat insects. Thrashers, flickers, woodpeckers, thrushes, kinglets, wrens, catbirds, orioles, juncos, and sparrows are a few of the many birds found locally that will feed regularly at suet feeders.

You can make a suet feeder very easily using 1/2-inch hardware cloth or a plastic mesh bag with fairly large mesh. Cage-like feeders constructed with hardware cloth should be attached to trees 5-6 feet above the ground. Leave the top of the cage open so new suet can be added easily. Plastic mesh bags (from oranges, onions, etc.) are excellent suet dispensers and can be attached with strong cords to tree limbs or trunks.

Bird cakes made of suet mixed with seed can be purchased or made at home. When making bird cakes, ask your butcher to run the suet through a grinder on a coarse setting. Ground suet is easier to melt. Bird cakes are made by melting the ground suet in a pan with a small amount of water and then pouring the suet into muffin pans to cool. Mixed seeds or even nuts can be added to the hot suet to create an appealing mixture for the birds. If acquiring suet is difficult, a substitute food can be mixed from one part vegetable shortening, one part peanut butter, three parts yellow cornmeal, one part cracked corn, and one part flour. This mixture is great for use in log feeders and with pine cones.

For more about this topic please contact Tony Glover, Regional Extension Agent-Home Horticulture, Home Gardens and Home Pest Management at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email [gloveta@auburn.edu](mailto:gloveta@auburn.edu).

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