

A guide to feeding the birds in your garden

Feeding the birds in your garden can bring all sort of rewards, from the simple pleasure of watching different species, to learning more about bird behaviour, to knowing that you're helping with the survival and breeding success of once common garden birds which are now in decline – e.g. the humble House Sparrow. But getting the most out of feeding garden birds and doing it safely needs an understanding of some key points...

Quality of food

Not all bird food is of the same quality. In fact some bird food – e.g. the unbranded type you might see on a market stall or in a pet shop – is often not only poor quality, but will contain all sorts of 'fillers' to pack the bag out and add colour. These fillers often include broken dog biscuit, pulses and split peas. Such bird foods, although often cheap, are poor value for money and will offer the birds in your garden little or no nutritional benefit (and most of it, anyway, won't even be eaten).

Buying bird food online or by mail order / over the phone from a large brand is likely to be a much safer bet, but even then it would be wrong to assume that the product was of the highest quality – despite some of the claims these brands make!

At The Wildlife Trusts we endorse just one brand of bird food, Vine House Farm, and we do that not simply because of the commercial relationship we have with them, but because product quality was a factor in the decision making process to reach that commercial relationship. Of course Vine House Farm isn't the only brand which sells high quality bird food, but they are a brand which we can guarantee you can fully trust.

Different food

Wild bird can food can basically be separated into the following types:

Straight seeds

As the term suggests, these are seeds which haven't been mixed with anything else and include black sunflower seeds, sunflower hearts (which are black sunflower seeds without the husk), niger, oil seed rape, wheat, red millet and white millet.

Seed mixes

Here, different seeds are mixed together with some mixes being aimed at particular families of birds (e.g. finches), and other mixes designed for different circumstances – e.g. a waste free mix with no husks. Seed mixes are particularly useful if you only want to have one or two feeders in your garden, rather than a greater number with different foods in each. Some seed mixes also contain non-seed ingredients such as dried mealworms and suet pellets (both of which are excellent foods for many garden bird species).

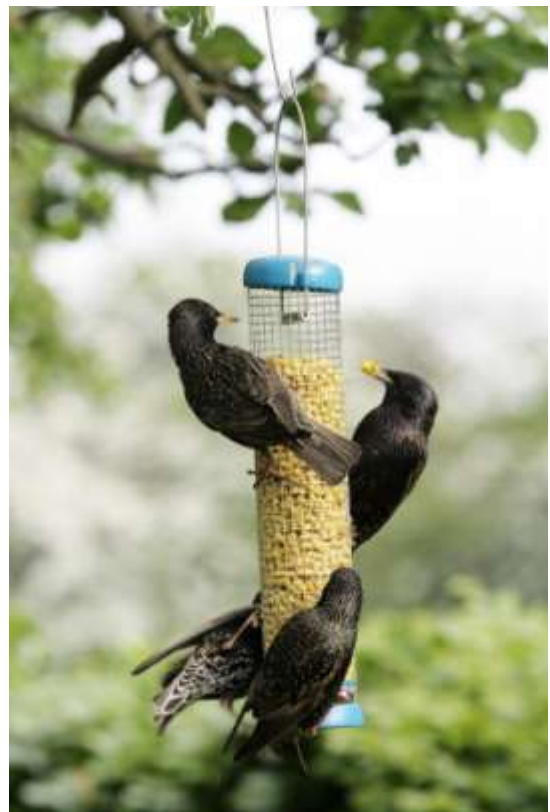
Peanuts

Probably the most traditional of all bird foods, peanuts are still popular but have fallen a little bit out of favour in recent years, as many people have switched to suet products instead which are often better value for money (the cost of peanuts has soared in recent years) and concerns about the their relatively high carbon footprint because they can't be grown in European countries (most come from China, Argentina and the US). None the less, it's still very much worth having some peanuts as part of your garden bird food options, though in addition to other foods you put out rather than being the main one as many people did in the past. One important point to note about peanuts: only ever feed them from a mesh peanut feeder like this one as birds can choke on whole peanuts if they're fed loose.



Suet

Suet products, or 'fat' as they're often also called, have become increasingly popular in recent years because they're often better value for money compared to other foods with high fat content like peanuts; they provide birds with high levels of energy; the main ingredient (suet) is a bi-product and therefore there are environmental benefits to using it. Added to which, all the Vine House Farm suet products are manufactured in the UK. Suet products can be separated into suet balls, suet blocks and suet pellets.



Live foods

Live foods means live mealworms! Mealworms are the larva of the darkling beetle, and this particular food can be an absolute lifeline for young birds in the nest and once they've fledged – in particular House Sparrows, Robins, Blackbirds and Starlings. For this reason, many people just feed live mealworms in the breeding season, though feeding them all year is certainly an option – in particular if you live in urban areas, or intensively farmed areas in the country, where natural invertebrate numbers are low.

As an alternative to live mealworms and if you really can't deal with the 'wriggle' (though it must be said there's nothing to worry about and even the most squeamish soon get used to it!), there are also dried mealworms which are the next best option.

What do birds eat?

This is not as straightforward as many people imagine, as garden birds which mainly eat insects and other invertebrates also eat seeds, and vice-versa. So it's really more about a bird species' preference, plus what's available with this also very much driven by the seasons – e.g. invertebrate eaters will switch more to fruit in the autumn and more to seeds in the winter. As a very basic guide though...

- Finches mainly eat seeds – hence their triangular bills which are strong enough to crack a seed husk.



- Tits mainly, and naturally, eat insects – hence their more pointed bills – but readily switch to seeds, plus also suet balls and blocks which they can peck pieces off.



- Blackbirds and Robins naturally eat invertebrates such as earthworms and insects, but will readily eat seeds provided they're not in a husk (they may eat very small seeds which are still in a husk, but can't break the husk of larger seeds such as black sunflower), plus suet pellets.



The other key factor which determines which species of bird eats what food, is about how you provide the food in the first place...

Different feeders and ways of feeding

Some birds can't land on hanging feeders, or find it very hard to. This is because they're naturally ground feeders, with the Blackbird and Song Thrush being the best examples. Robins can land on some hanging feeders provided they have a circular perch. However, providing food for ground feeding birds – even the same food as is in a hanging feeder – on a bird table or a ground feeding table, means all the song birds you attract to your garden will be able to feed. This is why having a variety of different feeders and feeding methods is as important as providing different types of food if a high number of different species of bird is to be attracted to a garden.

Here are the main types of feeder:

- Hanging seed feeder
 - use for straight seeds and seed mixes
 - can also be used for suet pellets
 - birds that will use it include finches, tits, House and Tree Sparrows, plus Robins if the perch is circular



- Niger seed feeder
 - designed just for tiny niger seeds (which would flow out of a normal hanging seed feeder)
 - birds which will use it: Goldfinch, Siskin and Redpoll



- Mesh peanut feeder
 - always use for peanuts
 - can also be used for suet pellets
 - birds which will use it: tits, some finches, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Nuthatch



- Live food / soft food feeders
 - use for live mealworms, plus soft food mixes which would otherwise get clogged in hanging seed feeder
 - birds which will use them include Robins, tits and Blackbirds



- Ground and table feeders
 - use for sunflower hearts and husk-free mixes
 - birds which will use them include Blackbirds, Robins, Starlings, Song Thrushes , Collared Doves



- Squirrel and corvid resistant feeders
 - use when grey squirrels and corvids such as Jackdaws and Rooks are a problem on other hanging feeders



Where to position feeders

There are two main factors to take into account when deciding where to position the feeders in your garden.

- Firstly, you obviously want the feeders in a position where you'll be able to watch and enjoy them through the windows of your home.
- Secondly and importantly, all bird feeders, and whether hanging, on the ground or as a bird table, must be far enough away from any cover where predators such as cats could hide and pounce.

Of course the size of your garden and what's in it might limit your options on where to position the feeders, but if an issue here is a lack of trees to hang feeders from then a feeding station like this one is ideal. This solution also means that you can move your feeders to a different position from time to time, with the added benefit of this being that the ground below gets a rest and doesn't become contaminated by dropped food.



Keeping feeders clean

Although the benefits of feeding wild birds in gardens far outweigh any negatives, it's very important this position isn't reversed by not keeping feeders clean. This is because feeders, if not kept clean, can harbour diseases which can easily be passed to other birds. So keeping feeders, and of course bird tables, clean is essential and there are a range of products to help you do this.

[Click here for more information.](#)

Don't forget the water!

And just as important as providing food for the birds in your garden, is also providing a supply of clean water. Garden birds need water both for drinking and bathing, with the latter important for birds to keep their plumage in good condition. [Click here for more information.](#)