

Mecklenburg Audubon Society



Backyard Notes: Bird Seed Basics

Every fall I get questions from people asking what is the best bird seed to use to attract birds to the yard. The first thing I do is to point out that birds are individuals and as individuals they have different preferences and needs. However, you don't have to go out and poll every bird in the yard to find out what they need. Here is a quick summary of what the literature says about birds and bird seed in the southeast:



Sunflower

Sunflower Seeds:

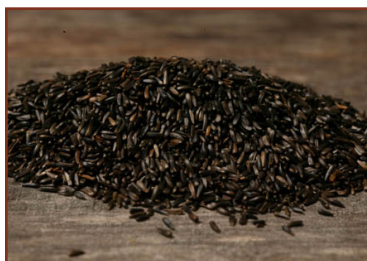
Probably the most widely preferred and eaten type of seed. Nearly fifty different species of birds are known to eat this premium grade fuel. It comes in several forms and varieties. Although the larger striped sunflower seed is enjoyed by larger birds, the smaller black-oiled seeds are easier for chickadee-size birds to handle. If you don't like all the mess under the feeder try hulled seeds often called sunflower hearts. These are more expensive and tend to spoil more quickly but are great patios and apartment balconies. Providing primarily the smaller sunflower seeds also attracts fewer house sparrows and starlings.



Millet

Millet:

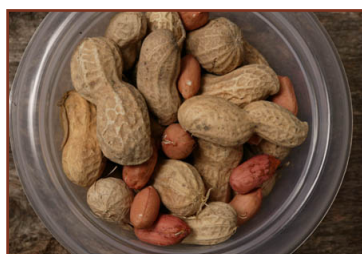
This small whitish seed is preferred by ground eating birds such as mourning doves, juncos, sparrows, etc. White millet is preferred over the red variety. Yes, house sparrows and starlings do like this seed too.



Nyjer (Thistle)

Niger/Thistle:

Although most of us refer to this seed as thistle, it is unrelated to the native thistles found in southern fields and byways. It is actually grown in Africa. Usually used to attract Goldfinches, other finches and Pine Siskens love these tiny seeds. To keep the house finches from gobbling down this somewhat expensive seed use a tube feeder with the feeding holes below the perches. Goldfinches and Siskens are small and agile enough to feed upside down from the perch but House Finches can't!



Peanuts

Peanuts:

Loved by people and birds alike. Titmice, chickadees, nuthatches, woodpeckers, cardinals, many sparrows and even the Carolina wrens love it. Although unshelled peanuts are easier for the smaller birds to handle, I once put whole shelled peanuts out on a platform feeder and watched a titmouse abscond with most of them in less than ten minutes. He just stabbed the shells with his beak and they flew off to stash them someplace safe and sound. Stay away from 'peanut hearts', the hard little pieces that fall out when the peanut is split in half. These are not as appealing as the meaty peanuts.

Corn:

Cracked corn attracts many of the same species that millet does - sparrows, juncos, and doves. Whole kernels are attractive to jays, some woodpeckers and what are considered game birds -- quail and turkey, which are hard to find in Mecklenburg County. It will also attract waterfowl including Canada Geese. Cornmeal can be mixed with suet or peanut butter to add energy. The downside of corn is it attracts cowbirds, grackles, starling, rock doves and house sparrows.

Safflower:

Related to the sunflower, it will be eaten [but not necessarily preferred] by cardinals, titmice, doves, finches, grosbeaks and a few sparrows. It is not as messy as sunflower seeds but is more expensive. I tried it for a while because I read somewhere that squirrels won't eat it, which just goes to prove not everything in print is true. My squirrels didn't hesitate a second.

Seeds to avoid:

Milo (large reddish round seeds in birdseed mix), canary seed, buckwheat, wheat, rice, oats, flax and rape seed. Birds will eat this if nothing else is available but you know someone down the street will have the good stuff. They also attract cowbirds, starlings and grackles.

Seed Mixes:

Although convenient, mixes found in supermarkets, home improvement centers, etc. generally have a lot of 'filler' which is not eaten by the birds. If you really want to do it right you make your own mix of 50% black-oil sunflower, 30% white millet, 10% peanuts, and 10% cracked corn. Or experiment to see what the birds like.



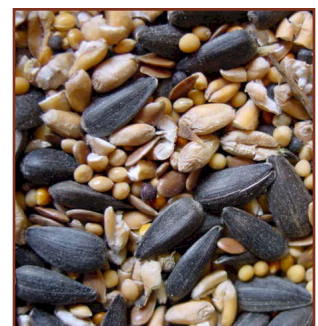
Cracked Corn



Safflower



Red Milo



Mixed Seed