

Feeding the Birds

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If you enjoy feeding the birds or want to try it for the first time, now is a good time to begin. There are lots of options from which to select.

Feeding sunflower seeds from a steel feeder with weight sensitive perches works well. Sunflower seeds are a favorite food source for most of the seed eaters including cardinals, chickadees, and titmice. By using the steel feeder with weight sensitive perches, you can adjust the feeder to shut if something as large as a squirrel or even a white winged dove attempts to feed from the perch. In a typical San Antonio neighborhood reducing access for squirrels and white wing doves will mean you will not have to obtain a second mortgage to provide seed.

Another option that will reduce consumption by the squirrels will be if you choose to feed safflower seed instead of sunflower seed. The seed eaters, including house finches and goldfinches, like safflower seed, but it is not a favorite food for squirrels.

In some neighborhoods there are American sparrows and one of my favorite birds, the Inca dove, that favor small seeds such as millet and mixed seed fed on the ground or on a low platform. It works best if those seeds are offered in the morning at a quantity that is consumed by early afternoon so that any surplus is less likely to attract rodents. Squirrels can be discouraged from eating this seed by obtaining a mix that is flavored with hot pepper. Rodents and squirrels pass on the hot pepper mix, but the birds are not affected by it.

Another seed offering that attracts special birds is Niger thistle. Stores like Wild Birds Unlimited and pet supply outlets sell the small black seed and special tube feeders that have tiny feeding slits that are readily used by lesser and American goldfinches. The American goldfinches visiting from the North are not brightly colored in the winter, but our resident lesser goldfinch males are very colorful.

To open a whole new group of birds to observation you may want to offer suet this winter. Suet is beef fat that attracts insect eating bird species. In my landscape three types of woodpeckers, 2 species of wren, kinglets, mockingbirds,

blue jays and even warblers are attracted to the suet. I use the pepper flavored version to discourage the squirrels from eating it.

Complement your bird seed feeding effort with one or more bird baths and you will bring in even more bird species. The bath can be rinsed and refilled every evening. To make it especially attractive to the birds obtain one of the water recycling apparatus. They are inexpensive and can be operated by solar power, electricity, or water pressure.

There is another development that you may want to consider as a new bird feeder. It is reported across San Antonio neighborhoods, and is true in my neighborhood, that Cooper's hawks are a bigger presence in recent years. This means that you may be sitting on the patio observing the Inca doves and English sparrows feeding when one of the Coopers hawks will come swooping in to attempt to catch a smaller

bird at a feeder or bird bath for its dinner. They can be quite bold, and the process is not a gentle one. In addition to attacking birds at feeders we had the attractive predators chase purple martins right into their apartments this summer and hunt lizards from the edge of the compost pile fence. The presence of an aggressive Coopers hawk in your landscape is interesting but requires some getting used to!