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BIRD'S THE WORD

ATTRACTING FEATHERED FRIENDS TO YOUR WINTER GARDEN

Imagine yourself drinking coffee by your window when you spot a red male cardinal sitting in a snow-covered spruce tree on a brilliant sunny winter day. With a few outdoor adjustments, and a visit to one of the local bird stores, you can increase your chances of watching a bird buffet outside your kitchen window. In order for our avian friends to survive the tough Northeast winters they need food, water, and protection from the elements. With bone-chilling temperatures, and predators such as the hawk or the neighborhood cat, it's not easy being a bird this time of year. "The birds don't truly need us to survive, but by giving them food it gives them a chance to survive longer," says Cathy Gifford, a master gardener based in Albany County.

As winter sweeps in, birds change their diets from worms and insects of fall to fruits and nuts, says Sue Ann DuBois, an avid birder and co-owner of Chips Landscaping in Porter Corners and editor of the Garden Goddess Sense and Sustainability blog.

In order to feed your hungry feathered crew, DuBois recommends buying suet, the energy bar of bird food, which is a favorite snack of woodpeckers. Black oil-safflower seeds provide the high fat that birds need during the winter as they expend a lot of energy to stay warm.

Lois Geshiwm, co-owner of Wild Birds Unlimited in Saratoga Springs, tells her customers to think of their backyards as restaurants. "You want fresh food.

"What brings you to a restaurant? It is the quality of food. Make sure the seed is fresh. Wet and moldy food is unattractive," says Geshiwm. "It's also important to change feeders at least once a week depending on the bird feeding activity. You can help put a stop to squirrel traffic by filling your feeder with seeds that squirrels don't care for (black oil safflower seeds and nitroicide) and by placing the feeder about five feet away from the ground and away from any squirrel launching pad.

Birds love winterberries and acorns. Many native plants have berries (ink berries, hollies, oaks). "Don't cut back your perennials. The smaller birds will feed on those during the winter," says

DuBois. If you don't have a birdbath yet, winter is a good time to get a good deal on one. DuBois says by adding a birdbath heater, the water won't freeze and the birds will swoop in to take advantage of the fresh water. Another way to add water to your backyard is to add heated water basins. Gifford has two water basins in her yard, and places a rock in one. She says this gives birds an idea of the water's depth.

Evergreens provide good dense shelters for the winter months. If you plant evergreens (spruce, pine, junipers, oak) or have them in your landscape year-round, they will provide protection from predators. "Recycle your Christmas tree, keep it on your stand, and put it out in the middle of your backyard. Believe it or not, that is a place where the small birds can really keep snug in the winter, especially if you don't have evergreens on your property," explains DuBois.

Geshiwm reports that a lot of people are seeing juncos in their yard in Clifton Park and Saratoga Springs, when they weren't able to see them during the summer months as they retreated to higher elevation. Other birds you can see in Saratoga County are cardinals, blue jays, chickadees, woodpeckers, and pinchers.

Doug Williams, Sanctuary Director of Stony Brook Wildlife Sanctuary and Nature Center in Norfolk, MA enjoys watching the birds take turns feeding

in his winter garden. He plants a lot of shrubs, trees, and other plants to provide cover for the birds. They hang out in his garden at the evening primrose and purple cornflowers. "The finches love those. I provide a lot of cover of varying heights," says Williams. He fills up his long tube feeders with black oil safflower seeds, and uses a platform feeder, which he built with a two-by-two piece of wood and cables. (Anybody with a saw can make this, he claims). "Birds like morning doves and cardinals don't do so well on a perch at a tube feeder. They are gangly, they are ground feeding birds typically, but they will come to a platform feeder," he says.

Gifford likes to buy bird food in bulk, including un-sugared cranberries, raisins, and seeds, and stores it outdoors in sturdy raccoon resistant metal garbage cans. The birds take shelter from the wind, seeking refuge in her honeysuckle tree. "The main thing is to have shelter near your bird feeders, in case a hawk or a cat stalks them. We just love watching the birds. They have such interesting personalities, and there is definitely something to be said for the pecking order," says Gifford.

Find bird food and goodies at Wild Birds Unlimited in Saratoga Springs and Backyard Birds in Latham, NY. **SL**

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