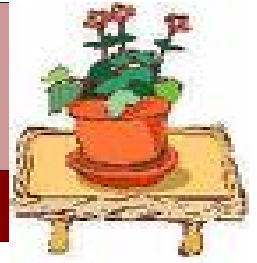


The Children's Corner



By Cathi Cote

Think about the birds!

As winter approaches and our gardens turn brown, it may seem like the entire outdoor world is falling asleep. Far from it! Our gardens remain thriving ecosystems both above and below ground during the cold winter months. Some of the most obvious (and interesting) residents in the winter garden are birds. The fall garden is a rich source of food for our native bird population, providing seeds, fruit, and insects...but what happens once the snow falls? Winter can be a very difficult time for our non-migratory bird population. Finding water and food is a challenge, and even shelter can be a problem once the deciduous trees have shed their leaves. Birds are warm blooded and must maintain a high metabolic rate in order to survive the ordeals of winter weather. Now is a good time to give our feathered friends a hand while teaching your children about another important facet of the natural world.

Most young children enjoy feeding and watching birds. Take a late fall walk together in your backyard or neighborhood and see how many different types of birds you can spot. Which birds are on the ground, and which are in trees? What kinds of sounds do you hear? Can you tell what they are eating? You will likely see small birds like finches, juncos, and chickadees hanging precariously from the tops of dead flower stalks, plucking away at the ripened seed heads. Robins and sparrows find sustenance in the fruit of crabapple, dogwood, and viburnum. Bluejays are regular visitors to corn fields and may even steal kernels from the Thanksgiving decorations hanging on your front door! Many birds are insect eaters, which is a good reason to encourage them to live in your garden. You may hear them scratching in the leaf litter looking for food. You may also see small birds patrolling overhangs and shutters on houses looking for spiders and other insect treats. Bring along a pictorial field guide to birds and try to identify which birds will be staying the winter versus those that are just "passing through". Mark the pages for later reference.

Once you identify the birds that frequent your area you'll be able to plan appropriate feeding stations. Bird feeders that hold seeds will appeal to birds that naturally seek out seeds and fruit in the wild, while suet feeders will attract the insect eaters. Regardless of whether you buy a feeder or make one yourself you need to consider placement and protection.

- Place your feeders where you can easily observe them.
- Position feeders near trees or shrubs that birds can use for cover, if needed.

To discourage squirrels and other unwanted feeder-bandits, position your feeders at least 5 feet off of the ground and eight to ten feet away from trees and buildings. Consider adding a baffle to thwart rodent pests coming from either above or below, depending on whether you hang your feeder or use a pole.

There are a number of bird feeder projects that you can create with children, all of which are easy and inexpensive to make. One old favorite is a pinecone slathered with peanut butter then rolled in bird seed. Tie a length of twine around the top of the cone as a hanger and you have a simple bird feeder. Or try making "bird pudding:" Gently warm a pound of lard or fat in a large pan on the stove. Mix in one cup of hot water, one cup of flour, two cups of oatmeal, and three to four cups of wild birdseed. Punch three evenly-spaced holes in the rim of a shallow plastic container such as a recycled plastic margarine tub. Fill your container with the bird pudding, thread string through the holes, and hang your new feeder in a convenient viewing location. (You can keep the extra in an airtight container for refills.)

Recycled food containers make very acceptable bird feeders. Repurpose a plastic cider jug, wax-coated milk carton, or coffee can (save the tops to keep out the rain). Cut two 2 to 4-inch wide holes in opposite sides of the container a few inches from the bottom. Create perches by cutting a smaller hole immediately below each opening and threading a wooden dowel from side to side through the container. Punch two more holes near the top to accommodate twine or wire for hanging then fill the bottom of the container with bird seed. You can even turn an empty grapefruit half or a small hollowed-out pumpkin or gourd into a bird feeder. Plastic mesh bags, like the ones used to package garlic or boiling onions, also make great seed containers and can be used for anything from tiny niger thistle seeds to hulled peanuts, depending on the gauge of the mesh. Don't be afraid to get creative! Keep in mind that not all seed suits all birds. Commercial seed mixes sometimes contain non-essential fillers like wheat and milo. Birds tend to "kick out" what they don't like. To reduce waste, consider using only one type of seed in each feeder; millet and black oil sunflower seeds are favored by many birds.

There are other ways to treat the birds besides making feeders. When the kids go out to make a snowman give them bird-friendly treats to decorate their creation. Make snow-person "hair" by sprinkling on sunflower or thistle seeds, or by draping on strands of millet. Dried sunflower seed heads make great ear muffs. Use a dried corncob for a nose. And what snow lady wouldn't appreciate a dried fruit or popcorn necklace? The kids will be proud of their creation...and the birds will appreciate it, too!

Once the snow starts flying, keep your bird feeders going. While there is some concern that territorial birds, like chickadees, may become overly dependent on feeders, the supplemental food that you provide will certainly help to make the harsh winter months more bearable for your feathered neighbors. Keeping your feeders full will also ensure that you and your children can continue to observe the birds throughout the winter months to learn more about them... together.