The basics of winter bird feeding

There’s a nip in the air, which may leave some Oklahomans wanting to close the curtains and curl up on the couch with a warm blanket and a mug of hot chocolate. Despite the cool weather, this time of year is still good for bird watching.

There are several species of birds that can still be found in the landscape during the winter months, so it’s a good idea to get those feeders out now. Feeding birds is a great way to brighten a drab, dreary day. Plus, birds are just fun to watch.

During the summer months, birds often feast on berries, bugs and flower nectar, but nourishment can be hard to find in the winter. Putting out the feeders will help these feathered creatures make it through the cold season and they’ll likely hang around for your enjoyment in the summer, too.

If your birdfeeders have been stored throughout the warmer months, get them out and give them a good cleaning. Wash them in soapy water and then rinse in a 10% bleach solution. It’s important to make sure the feeders are completely dry before adding food. Also, take time to clean the feeders periodically throughout the winter. Diseases can grow in wet and moldy seed, as well as in bird droppings.

It’s important to match your feed and feeders to the type of bird you want to attract. Offering a variety of seeds in various types of feeders will attract a bigger variety of birds.

The best overall choice for birdseed is the small black-oil sunflower seed. Many smaller species of birds such as chickadees, nuthatches and titmice prefer it. The thin shell is easy to crack open and the high oil content is good for them. Small birds also like thistle. Larger birds such as blue jays and cardinals like the striped sunflower seed. Suet is a great option for woodpeckers and nuthatches.

Don’t stick with just birdseed. Fruit feeders loaded with wedges of oranges, apples and bananas will attract orioles, bluebirds, towhees, woodpeckers, tanagers, brown thrashes, catbirds and robins.

We all know water is important to human life, but it’s also vital for birds. They drink it and also use it to keep themselves clean. Clean feathers better insulate against the cold weather. Be sure to keep your birdbath clean and filled with fresh water.

More information on attracting birds to the landscape can be found in the Oklahoma State University Extension publication Landscaping and Gardening for Birds.