Bird feeders bring wildlife to the landscape

In addition to my love of plants, I have always admired birds and can spend hours watching them. As a young boy growing up in Iowa, my favorite birds were the scarlet tanager and the Baltimore oriole, which often made nests in our trees.

Over the holiday break I enjoyed watching many birds visit the two feeders we have hanging in a tree out our living room window. We saw several species, including finch, downy woodpecker, dark-eyed junco, chickadee, cardinal and tufted titmouse, along with others. A relatively newcomer to our feeders this year were goldfinches donning their winter plumage, which isn’t quite as colorful as summer on the males, but they still show some bright yellow when the sun hits them just right.

If you haven’t put out any birdfeeders yet, give it a try. They are fun to watch and add life to the dormant landscape. If you have some feeders but haven’t used them in a while, wash them in soapy water and then rinse in a 10% bleach solution. Make sure the feeders are completely dry before adding food. Feeders should be periodically cleaned throughout the winter to reduce diseases that can grow in wet and moldy seed, as well as in bird droppings.

It’s important to match your birdfeeders to the type of bird you want to attract. Smaller birds such as chickadee, tufted titmouse and finches prefer the tube feeders. Larger birds such as cardinals and blue jays prefer hopper or platform feeders and birds such as the morning dove eat seed on the ground.

We all know people like different types of food. Some of us like cheeseburgers, while others prefer a lobster tail or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. The same is true for birds. Different species of birds prefer different types of food. Thistle and black oil sunflowers are good for smaller birds, cardinals like sunflowers of all types and millet is good for ground feeding birds. A good general bird feeding mix is white proso millet and black oil sunflower. Suet is good for woodpeckers and nuthatches.

You can mix it up a little by adding fruit feeders to you yard. Fruit feeders with wedges of oranges, apples and bananas are favored by orioles, bluebirds, towhees, woodpeckers, tanagers, brown thrashes, catbirds and robins. In addition to supplemental feeders, consider planting native plants in the landscape to provide natural food sources.

While water is vital to human life, it also is an important feature for birds. They not only drink it, but they also use it to keep themselves clean. Clean feathers better insulate against the cold
weather. If you have a birdbath heater, be sure it shuts off automatically when the water reaches about 40 degrees Fahrenheit, so it doesn’t get too warm. Also, remember it’s important to keep the water and the birdbath clean.

More information about attracting birds to the landscape is available on the Oklahoma State University Extension webpage.