Attracting birds to the landscape in the winter

Aside from the beautiful flowers, shrubs and trees in a lush summer landscape, these elements serve another purpose other than being visually attractive – they also attract birds to the area. Now that the cold weather has set in, what can you do to entice these feathered friends to continue to visit?

Food is very important to birds in the wintertime. During the warmer months they can easily nosh on plants and insects in the landscape, but during the cold part of the year, birds are much more dependent on humans to provide them with sustenance. Harsh weather conditions coupled with less food can be a challenge for the feathered population. To help keep bird mortality low, consider hanging a few bird feeders from the trees in your yard.

Birds get the energy they need to survive the winter weather from foods high in oil and fat, including suet, peanuts, sunflower seeds, peanut butter and Nyjer (thistle). Offering a smorgasbord of choices is nice, but tailor the selections that suit the species of birds found in the landscape.

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

Don’t limit the food offerings to seed and suet. Fruit feeders are a great way to provide needed energy for birds. Load them with wedges of orange or apple or sliced bananas.

While birds may be on the hunt for food this winter, they’re also looking for a water source. Birds can melt snow and ice for water, but providing it in fresh, liquid form is best. A heated birdbath is a great addition to the landscape, adding not only texture and color, but a needed resource for birds. Gardeners may be surprised at the number of different species they may find at the watering hole.

Birds will also use the water to keep themselves clean. Clean feathers insulate much better against the cold than dirty feathers. Be sure to clean the birdbath regularly to avoid spreading illness.

Along with food and water, providing shelter for birds is another way to help them survive through the winter. Small piles of limbs can provide a place for birds to shelter from the wind and hide from predators. Bird houses and bird roost boxes are good methods of protection, too, especially when placed out of the northern wind. Gardeners can help by providing nesting materials such as yarn, scraps of cloth or even dryer lint for the birds to use as insulation.
During the cold winter months, looking out into your landscape and seeing a variety of birds can be an enjoyable activity for the family. Pick up a book about birds and see how many different species you can identify. Providing these creatures with food, water and shelter will help ensure they’ll hang out in your landscape all year long.

For more information on attracting birds to the landscape see the Oklahoma State University Extension fact sheet HLA-6435 Landscaping and Gardening for Birds.