

Where did all those sunflower seeds go?

While this winter's temperatures have demonstrated record breaking highs, I don't suspect we're going to get away with warm sun and gentle rains much longer. After all, it is winter! And, yes, our trees and shrubs need a good dousing to enter the season of frozen tundra in January [usually!].

If you have been watching bird behavior in this mild climatic condition, you may have noticed an unprecedented rate of empty birdfeeders. Why, you might wonder when winter seems so distant?

Nature is in a state of limbo right now, no longer autumn, not yet winter. With the passing of fall, most blossoms have disappeared, most insects have vanished, and berries are drying on the bush. This creates a gap in available food sources for our feathered friends. They will rely on seed from feeders here-on-out. And once water freezes, they are desperate for heated bird baths. Eating snow and ice requires a 10-fold increase in calories.

In our community, chickadees, titmice, and nuthatches visit feeders frequently in the fall. They are planning their winter diets by taking sunflower and other seeds and "caching" them in tree bark folds, needle clusters, nooks and crannies near feeders, even under house eaves. They return in the winter when other seeds are lacking and eat these caches to survive.

Chickadees actually increase the number of brain cells in the autumn when they are most involved with caching. They need to be able to remember where they cached all those seeds and these additional neurons enable this recall. Nutcrackers establish thousands of caches storing up to 100,000 seeds for future use. Unlike squirrels, these birds are able to find their hidden food sources. Those not eaten often germinate in the spring producing new saplings.

If you want to have a little fun providing food for winter's birds, here is a recipe from Peggy Carney's sister, Deborah, who is a member of the Mountain Garden Club in North Conway.

Birdseed Ornament Recipe

- Bird seed [mixed seeds work well]
- Unflavored gelatin
- Boiling water
- Cookie cutters
- Straws cut into 2 inch pieces
- Large bowl

- Spoon
- Baking sheet
- Parchment or wax paper
- String (jute or baker's twine)

1. Dissolve 2 table-spoons (or 2 individual packets) of gelatin in 2/3 cup of boiling water. Sprinkle on top of the water and whisk to combine.
2. When gelatin is dissolved completely, add 2 cups of bird seed.
3. Mix for 2 to 3 minutes to allow the seeds to soak up the gelatin mixture. Depending on how absorbent your seeds are, you may have some excess gelatin mixture – it won't matter in the end.
4. Place your cookie cutters on a parchment – or wax paper-lined baking sheet; carefully fill them with the bird seed mixture. Be sure to overfill them just a bit because you'll want the seeds to be nice and tight inside the cookie cutters.
5. Cover the filled cookie cutters with another sheet of parchment or wax paper and press the seeds firmly.
6. Gently insert a straw segment all the way into each shape in order to create a hole for the loop of string for hanging.
7. Allow the bird seed ornaments to dry for 3-4 hours (flipping them halfway through) before gently pushing them out of the cookie cutters; allow finish drying overnight.
8. In the morning, gently pluck out the straw segments and add a loop of string.



Peggy and I made these one afternoon and have this feedback to provide:

Tiny cookie cutters don't work. The mass is too small to eject from the mold without destruction!

Very large ones will fall apart when the birds begin to eat them or they get wet from rain or snow. Moderate sized molds [4" long] without projections [like ears, feet, and hands] seem the simplest and most successful.

This is a fun project to do with grandkids and it benefits the birds.