SPECIAL REPORT:

BIRDSEED BUYER’S GUIDE

Save Big $$ While Getting More Birds At Your Feeders
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About The Author

Kurt Hagemeister has over 35 years of experience feeding, attracting, and watching backyard birds. Having been introduced to the hobby by his grandmother in the Detroit area, Kurt has spent much of his adult life learning through trial and error how to attract a great variety of birds to the backyard. Prior to starting BackyardBirdLover.com, Kurt founded and ran a successful backyard bird feeding and nature store for over 15 years. During this time, his store received franchise awards for high sales and profitability. He has personally helped thousands of people begin or improve their backyard bird feeding and watching hobby over the years.

Kurt is also a co-founder and current President of the Michigan Bluebird Society - a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to helping bluebirds and other native cavity nesting birds in Michigan. He is considered an expert on attracting bluebirds and is on the national Speaker's Bureau of the North American Bluebird Society. Kurt is a published author of articles on backyard birds and bluebirds, while giving many presentations each year to Audubon groups, garden clubs, at birding festivals, and other organizations. He has been a bluebird "landlord" for over 13 years, resulting in the successful fledging of hundreds of young birds.

He is a member of the Purple Martin Conservation Association and North American Bluebird Society. Also, Kurt lives on a 2 1/2 acre property that has been certified by the National Wildlife Federation as a backyard wildlife habitat. Through his gardening and "birdscaping" efforts, he has attracted over 86 species of birds to his yard.

Kurt's greatest passion is teaching others about how to attract and care for wild birds so they will be around for future generations to enjoy.
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Foreword

Thank you for downloading this report. As someone who has fed and watched backyard birds for many years, I can tell you that all birdseed is not created equal. Far from it. In this report, you’re going to learn how to pick the types of seeds YOUR backyard birds prefer, what seeds to avoid like the plague, how and where to buy birdseed, how to save money on seed, what types of feeders to use for each type of seed to avoid waste, how to store birdseed correctly so you don’t waste it, and much more.

Most of the information in this report will pertain to feeder birds all over North America. But, where there are significant regional differences, I will point them out.

I strive to give you what you need to know concisely in this report, because I know how busy you are. All the advice is based on the latest findings in the bird feeding world and is actionable right away.

But, you’re probably wondering who am I to advise you on birdseed? Well, I’ve been feeding and advising others on wild birds almost continuously for the better part of 35 years. This includes....

• Feeding birds in Texas, Michigan, California, and Wisconsin
• Researching, buying, and selling birdseed for over 15 years
• Helping thousands of people personally to start and improve their birdfeeding hobbies.
• Writing articles and speaking to many nature, garden, and other civic groups about backyard birds.
• Creating a National Wildlife Federation Certified Backyard Habitat on my property that has attracted 86 species of birds over the last 14 years.

Despite all this, I am still learning every day just like you. But, my great passion in life is helping to spread the word about how people can help backyard birds and wildlife. And that’s what my website and this report are all about.
Backyard birdfeeding and bird watching is a wonderful hobby that is both educational, relaxing, and will bring more peace to your life. Today, it’s the 2nd most popular outdoor hobby (behind only gardening) and is enjoyed by 1 in 4 Americans – that’s almost 70 million people! And the best part is that you can get started immediately for very little money. A lot of information is available online on websites like BackyardBirdLover.com.

So, let’s get started talking about birdseed.
Birdseed Basic Facts

History

Feeding backyard birds is a hobby that goes back hundreds of years. In the early days, there were no fancy feeders or specialty bird foods. Only bread and grain scraps, usually thrown on the ground, as in an account by Henry David Thoreau.

The earliest seeds used in birdfeeding were corn and sunflower – mainly because it was grown on the early farms in America. Doubtless, the settlers noticed the birds feeding on the ripe sunflower heads in the field and the rest is history, so to speak.

The sunflower family of plants is actually native to North America. In fact, it had been actively cultivated for food and medicinal purposes by Native Americans for thousands of years before the Europeans arrived on the continent. The earliest Spanish explorers took some of the sunflower plants back to Europe where it became extremely popular. In Russia, the sunflower was extensively researched and grown in large quantities. After that, it eventually came back to the U.S. and Canada as a popular agricultural crop in the 1800’s.

Today, more than 500,000 acres are devoted to growing sunflower for the birdseed market in the U.S. alone. The largest producing states by far are the 2 Dakota’s and Minnesota. The two main varieties of sunflower used in birdfeeding are the black oil and striped types. And oil sunflower as we’ll see is the most popular single seed with birds too.

The earliest known company that started selling birdseed dates back to around 1860 – a company that eventually became Kaytee (a large seller of birdseed today). But, it was a business that grew very slowly for a long time. As the 1900’s went on, more and more people became interested in wild birds. This led to the production of bird feeders, nesting boxes, and birdbaths.
Even in the 1950’s and 1960’s, birdfeeding and bird watching were still in their infancy as hobbies. The hobby really started to take off in the later 1970’s and 1980’s. This is when you started seeing specialty stores and catalogs selling all kinds of birdfeeding supplies. Today, it is a business selling in excess of $20 billion dollars annually!

Do All Birds Eat Birdseed?

Only a limited number of bird species eat seed. Many of the birds we see in our yards and nearby woods/fields eat other foods like insects, berries, or other small animals. The main types of backyard birds that eat seed are:

Cardinals
Towhees
Sparrows
Jays/Crows
Chickadees
Titmice
Doves/Quail
Pheasants
Nuthatches
Grackles and other blackbirds
Woodpeckers (some)
Finches/Siskins/Redpolls
Junco’s
Grosbeaks
Buntings
Turkey’s

If you’re not sure what some of these birds are, find a field guide of local birds and familiarize yourself with their appearance.

What Are The Best Types of Seed To Use In Birdfeeding?

Today, most of the commercially sold birdseed (both blends and straight seeds) are pretty much based on what birds prefer and therefore demanded by people. I say pretty much because there are still some seeds sold that backyard birds don’t like much. But, I’ll have
more on that later. Here is a list of the main types of birdseed you should have in your feeding program:

1. **Oil Sunflower** – if you only have one kind of seed in your feeders, this should be it. It’s the favorite seed of the most number of birds. It’s higher in oil content and has less husk than other varieties of sunflower. Smaller birds have an easier time cracking it open.

2. **Striped Sunflower** – larger than oil sunflower and having a larger husk, it’s liked by larger seed eating birds like cardinals, grosbeaks, and jays.

3. **Nyjer Thistle** – this is not a true thistle plant and is actually imported from hot climate countries like India and Nigeria. Finches of all kinds love it, often preferring it over sunflower.

4. **White Millet** – this is another grain that is used for human food, but is preferred by ground feeding birds like doves, sparrows, and juncos.

5. **Cracked Corn** – this type of corn is far easier for backyard birds to eat than whole kernel corn. It is primarily eaten by ground feeding birds.

6. **Safflower** – this is more of an “optional” seed for your feeders. It is often a “problem solver” in that it is not liked by blackbirds and squirrels that can often dominate bird feeders. But not nearly as many other birds eat it compared to sunflower.

7. **Hulled Sunflower** – this is really just another form of sunflower (the meat of the striped sunflower seed). But, it’s an excellent seed to use where the husk mess is not wanted. Birds like it because they don’t have to work to crack it open.

8. **Shelled Peanuts** – these are loved by woodpeckers, titmice, chickadees, jays, nuthatches, and Carolina Wrens. You can use either roasted or raw, but stay away from salted. Peanuts can be fed in a special mesh feeder where the birds pick the pieces through the screen, or in a mix of regular seeds.

**Does Freshness Matter?**

Absolutely is the short answer. Birdseed can get stale. It can dry out. It can get moldy. And it can get infested by insects or mice. It can be hard to tell that seed is bad by just looking at it. But the birds seem to know. For example, Goldfinches will not touch thistle that’s gotten stale or moldy in the feeder.

**Can Birds Get Dependent On Birdseed?**

Many studies have been done confirming that birds do NOT become limited to one or two food sources (like backyard feeding stations). They go to many food locations each day.
Birds know instinctively that to survive, they must not get too dependent on a few sources of food. So, don’t worry if you have to stop feeding for a while or go on a trip.

However, the exception might be when there is heavy snow and/or extreme cold. In these conditions, bird feeders can make a big difference in birds’ survival.
Know What Your Backyard Birds Want

In order to provide the right kinds of seeds to your birds, you need to have some idea of what variety of birds are common in your yard. This will give you an idea of what seeds to offer and in what quantity.

Habitat makes a difference obviously. If you have a tiny urban backyard, you will not need a lot of feeders or seed types. But, if you live on a multi-acre property in the country with lots of woods and types of trees, you will probably have a large population of bird species.

It’s OK though if you don’t know anything yet about your birds’ preferences. Maybe you’re just getting started. If so, you can put out a few general purpose feeders that attract a wide range of birds. Then based on the results, you can start offering more types of seed and other bird foods.

You read on page 8 about what are the common birds continent-wide that eat seed at birdfeeders. After that, you read about the best seeds to offer. So, your first action step must be to note the species of birds that seem to be common in your neighborhood and yard. Use a field guide to identify the birds if necessary.

Once you have an idea of your local feeder bird population, you need to match them up with the seeds preferred by those birds. Sound pretty straight-forward? It really is.

Here is general bird seed preference guide using the popular seeds on the previous page. Remember that it’s only a guideline and that some birds will readily eat multiple types of seed.

Oil Sunflower – again, this should be your number one choice of seeds. All of these birds will eat it: finches, cardinals, nuthatches, titmice, chickadees, jays, grackles, blackbirds, woodpeckers, grosbeaks, some sparrows, and many more.

Striped Sunflower – grosbeaks, jays, cardinals, woodpeckers, nuthatches, Turkey’s

Safflower – Titmice, Cardinals, House Finches, Doves, Nuthatches, Chickadees
White Millet and Cracked Corn – Sparrows, Doves, Quail, Pheasants, Towhees, Cowbirds, Buntings, Junco’s

Nyjer Thistle – Finches, Siskins, Redpolls, Doves, Chickadees, Buntings

Hulled Sunflower – goldfinches, some sparrows, chickadees, titmice, woodpeckers

In a later section we’ll give you the final piece of the puzzle – the feeders you need to put out to maximize the types of birds you attract while reducing waste.

Shelled Peanuts – woodpeckers, titmice, nuthatches, Carolina Wrens, chickadees.

Ground Feeders are excellent for attracting birds like sparrows, doves, quail, towhees, and juncos.
How To Use Birdseed Mixes

Birdseed can be put in feeders in either mixes or in straight form. There are reasons to do both depending on the type of seed as well as type of feeder.

The advantage of a seed mix or blend is that you can attract a larger variety of birds to one feeder. This is good if you don’t have the room for more than one or two feeders. And some types of bird feeders (like the tray or hopper types) have large perch platform areas that any size bird can land on. These feeders lend themselves well to mixes.

Here are a few important considerations when choosing a mix:

**Quality of the Blend**

Not all seed mixes are created equal. Some people think that a mix is a mix. Well, take my word for it – the birds know the difference! You want to offer a seed mix that contain only the seeds your backyard birds prefer. If you stick to the seed types on the last page, you’ll be doing well.

However, many cheaper commercial seed mixes you see in the store are loaded with waste grains or seeds not liked by most birds. These seeds may make the blend more colorful and bulkier, but they’ll attract far fewer birds. Examples of these seeds are milo, red millet, golden millet, rape, flax, canary seed, and wheat.

**Type Of Feeder You’re Going To Put It In**

One important fact is that each species of bird has specific preferences as to where in the yard they like to feed. Some birds like to feed on the ground. Others like to feed up in the tree branches. Some prefer to be on or not far from the tree trunk. And yet others will feed in a variety of heights and locations.

For example, if you review the previous pages where we showed the types of birds that eat White Millet and Cracked Corn, you’ll notice most of these birds are ground feeding birds. This means, they prefer given a choice, to feed on or near the ground. So, you will usually want to put these seeds on the ground directly or in an elevated ground feeder.
**Nyjer Thistle** needs to be put in a dedicated finch feeder. Otherwise, these tiny, delicate seeds will be more prone to getting wet or knocked onto the ground where the finches don’t like to feed.

A good general purpose seed mix works well in a pole-mounted hopper birdfeeder, tray feeder, or ground feeder. Sometimes you can put mixes in a tube feeder as well. But, you don’t want to put white millet or cracked corn in these feeders.

**Proportion Of Each Seed In The Blend**

This is something you’ll need to just “tweak” after you’ve noticed the variety of birds in your yard. One thing you’ll need to watch closely is the whether the amount of millet is correct or not. If there’s too much spilled on the ground (you’re not getting enough ground feeding birds), you’ll see what’s called “millet buildup” under the feeder. This occurs because the birds are looking more for sunflower and tossing out the millet onto the ground. If you don’t deal with this, you’ll be spending more money for the number of birds you’re getting.

**Seasonal Differences**

After you’ve fed the birds for a few years, you’ll notice that you have a different population of feeder birds in the cold weather vs. the warmer months. A lot of the birds will be the same. But, you’ll get some different birds that migrate into your area. An example is the dark-eyed junco. These birds appear in the fall after migrating from northern areas of the continent.

Also, you’ll get more of some birds than you previously did. This could be because of natural food shortages for that species or simply weather related.

So, all this may dictate that you feed more of one seed and cut back in others.

**Advice**

Put seed blends in:

- **Ground feeders**
- **Large wooden hopper feeders or covered tray feeders**
- **Tube Feeders – especially with trays on the bottom**

Stay away from blends with dried fruit. Most seed eating birds won’t eat them, so it’s a waste of money. And if you use blends with peanuts or fruit in them, be aware that
starlings may be attracted to the feeder. Starlings are non-native, aggressive birds that can invade feeders in large numbers and scare away other birds.

European Starlings can dominate bird feeders, but aren't fond of most kinds of seed.
How To Use Straight Seeds

Just like seed mixes work well in certain types of feeders, straight seeds (putting one kind only in a feeder) make a lot of sense in others. And they can result in a lot less waste and lower seed bill each month.

One reason for using one seed type in a feeder is to eliminate the problem of certain birds sorting through the seeds to find the ones they want and knocking the rest onto the ground. This can result in a lot of wasted seeds, especially if the ground feeding birds are not cleaning up the ones that fall.

Another reason to put a straight seed in a feeder is to solve a specific problem. For example, safflower works well in a tube feeder to eliminate blackbirds from eating up all the seed. This is because blackbirds (grackles, red-winged blackbirds, and cowbirds) don’t like safflower.

Another example is using hulled sunflower in a feeder to eliminate the husk mess building up under the feeder. A little known fact is that sunflower husks emit a chemical when breaking down that inhibits plant growth. This is why you often see bare patches under bird feeders that feed a lot of sunflower seeds.

Straight seeds often make sense in small bird feeders that as their name suggests, mainly attract smaller birds that eat sunflower or safflower most of the time.

As I’ve already mentioned with Nyjer thistle – this seed needs to be put in a special finch feeder by itself for best results.

Advice

Put straight seeds in:

- Tube Feeders
- Window Feeders
- Small Clinging Bird Feeders
- Finch (Thistle) Feeders
Where To Buy Birdseed And Where Not To

Birdseed can be bought almost anywhere now. But here are your major choices:

- Grocery stores
- Garden Centers
- Home Centers
- Birdfeeding Specialty Stores
- Over the Internet
- Mail Order
- Feed and Grain Mills
- Hardware Stores
- Big Box Stores

Wherever you buy birdseed, look very closely at the blend contents. Look for mixes that ONLY contain the seeds listed in the Birdseed Basic Facts section of this report. Stay away from cheaper mixes that contain red millet, milo, wheat, canary seed, dried fruit, and other seeds birds don’t like. Companies make these seed blends so they can sell it at a cheap price with no regard for whether backyard birds will eat much of it. In the long run, these blends are a big waste of your money.

Although it’s possible to find some high quality seeds and mixes at Home Centers, and Big Box stores, be wary of freshness levels. These stores buy products in huge quantities in centralized purchasing offices (with no regard to regional differences in bird preferences for seeds) and don’t restock often. So, if you notice birds aren’t eating seed from these stores, switch to another source.

Internet and Mail Order can be an option for high quality seeds, but the shipping costs can make it not viable. But, if you have the budget for it and like the convenience of having the seed delivered right to your door, this can be a good option.

Feed and Grain Mills can be inexpensive places to buy birdseed, and the quality can be good if the seeds are grown not far away. However, their blends are usually no better than ordinary Home Center or Hardware Store varieties.
**Birdfeeding Specialty Stores** are your best bet for quality straight seeds and blends. They normally get in birdseed every week, so the freshness is much better. Also, they are highly likely to sell mixes that are suited for the local birds in your region. Over the long run, this can save you a lot of money by cutting back on waste. Sometimes you can find straight seeds cheaper elsewhere, but be cautious about the quality. Thistle in particular can dry out and lose its attractiveness to birds quickly. Saving a little money at a home center will do you no good if the birds won’t eat it.

**Advice**

1. Try to find a local store or sales outlet where there are knowledgeable people about backyard birds – whether it’s a birdfeeding specialty store, garden center, or seed mill. Ask the sales person some questions to gauge their knowledge.

2. Avoid stores that only sell birdseed at certain times of the year (like only Fall and Winter). If they do this, they’re not serious about helping dedicated backyard bird lovers like you.

3. Don’t buy birdseed and pay huge shipping charges (unless money is no object and you have no one to handle it for you).

4. Price should NOT be your only or main criterion in what seeds to buy. Look at quality and value. High quality blends will attract a lot more birds for the dollar than cheap ones.
Make Sure To Buy Smart

When you go out to buy birdseed, there are some market forces that affect supply, demand, and pricing that you need to be aware of. This will help you buy more smartly and save money. In the last 30 years or so, a number of trends occurred that affected the birdseed market:

- **Human Consumption of sunflower products has increased tremendously with the emphasis on eating more healthy.** This “people” market pays a higher price for the crop, so it often has left less for birdfeeding.
- **Demand for U.S. grain products in developing countries has exploded as these economies have expanded.** The demand has driven up the price as a result.
- **The number of households feeding the birds has risen dramatically in this period.** And families often have a greater number of bird feeders than 30 years ago.
- **The price of energy has risen sharply.** And fuel is used to plant, harvest, and transport birdseed.

Aside from the above, in any given year, the climate can cause huge swings in pricing and supply of seed. Droughts in the key sunflower and corn growing areas can drive up prices, as can frosts just before harvest time in the fall.

But grain crops like sunflower have prices that act like most commodities. Traders can drive up or down the price quite a bit based on news they hear from day to day.

Finally, although the cold weather months were historically the strongest demand time of year for birdseed, today bird feeding has become more of a year-round business.

**With all this in mind, here are some tips on getting the most for your birdseed dollars:**

1. Don’t have the “Costco Mindset” with buying seed. Purchasing “in bulk” to save money is NOT a good idea in general. Birdseed is perishable and can become stale or get infested by insects or mice the longer it’s stored. So, unless you have a very cool, very dry space that is completely protected from pests, it’s best to buy only the amount of seed you can use in 1-2 months time at most.
2. Take advantage of birdseed sales. Many stores now have several a year. If they offer a service to “store” purchased seed for you (think of a banking system where you pay for it then make withdrawals), take advantage of it.
3. Try to shop at places that offer a frequent buyer program of some sort. Since you’re going to be buying seed regularly, why not get rewarded with discounts or free seed.

4. If you have the time and inclination, you can save money by buying straight seeds and mixing them yourself. This can be a good way also to make the perfect seed blend for your backyard, since YOU control exactly how much of each seed goes into it.

5. Read ingredient labels on birdseed carefully so you know what seeds are in it, where it was packaged, when it was packaged, and the quantity you’re getting at that price.

6. You will usually save a lot of money by buying seed in the largest sized bags – either 20 or 25 pound sizes or even larger will be cheaper (40 or 50 pound bags). This may not always be practical. But for seeds or blends you use a lot of, it’s a good idea. But only buy sizes of bags that you can lift and handle safely.
Storing Birdseed The Right Way

Now that we’ve talked about what kind of birdseed is best, how to feed it, and how to buy it in the most effective manner, now you need to know the right way to store your birdseed. Why is this important? You don’t want to waste seed by letting it go bad or get infested by pests.

Your birdseed being a perishable food item has several enemies

- **Heat** – storing seed in a hot area (like a garage) can dry out birdseed by lowering its moisture content. This makes it less desirable to the birds.
- **Moisture** – will cause your seed to get moldy eventually.
- **Insects** – there are a number of insects that feed on grains, most notably the grain moth. These moths often lay their eggs in birdseed when the grain is still in the field. Then when conditions get warm enough, will hatch the following year (when the seed is in your house). So, you want to store your seed in as cool a place as possible. These moths can also get into birdseed from outside if it’s stored in an open bag or container with no way to seal it.
- **Rodents and other mammals** – mice, chipmunks, squirrels, raccoons, and other mammals love birdseed. And they’ll get into your seed in the garage, basement, or back porch. The key here is to store it in a container they can’t get into. (See below)
- **Time** – the longer you store your birdseed, the greater the chance it will get stale, go bad, or get infested.

**Advice**

1. Store your birdseed in a metal garbage-type can that has a **tight fitting lid**. If the lid is not tight, string a bungee cord across the top so a raccoon can’t easily take the top off (if your seed is stored in the garage or outdoor shed). Or put a heavy weight on the top of the lid. Another advantage of metal containers is they can’t be chewed through by mice or squirrels. The mammals can and will chew through any rubber or plastic container. I like the large 20 gallon sizes that can fit several 20-25 pound bags.
2. Find another place to store your seed other than the garage – if possible. This may be OK in the cooler weather, but in the summer, the heat in the garage can greatly shorten the life of the seed.

3. If you store birdseed indoors, MAKE SURE to store it in a very tight container. And don’t open it near your kitchen in the event grain moths were in the seed, hatched, and have turned into moths. If they fly out and get into the kitchen, they can be very hard to eradicate without cleaning everything out of the pantry cabinets. (NOTE: grain moths are the greatest issue in late summer or early fall)

4. Again, only buy enough seed that you will go through in 1-2 months time – especially in the warmer weather months. This will help to ensure freshness and reduce the chances of grain moths infesting all your seed.

5. Don’t put any chemical-based insect or mammal repellant/poison in the same container or area where your birdseed is stored. Use only biologically safe products if you choose to do so.

Galvanized metal garbage cans work great for birdseed
Conclusions

We’ve covered a lot in this short report. But, here are the takeaways you should take action on....

- Watch and learn about the backyard birds in your neighborhood to see the species that around and what feeding preferences they have.
- Start with oil sunflower seed and a good seed blend to start with. Put up a tube feeder for the smaller birds, and pole-mounted wooden feeder for the seed blend.
- Only buy seed blends with sunflower (oil and/or striped), safflower, cracked corn, hulled sunflower, white millet, shelled peanuts, and cracked corn – or some combination thereof.
- Avoid seed blends with red millet, milo, wheat, flax, rape & canary seed, and dried fruit.
- If you have finches around, buy a small amount of thistle to start with (5 lbs. or so) and put it in a hanging finch feeder.
- Only buy enough seed that will last you 1-2 months (to avoid spoilage).
- Buy your birdseed at stores that get in a fresh supply regularly and have knowledgeable people working there that understand local birds.
- Take advantage of buying programs like frequent buyer clubs and “birdseed banking” or storage plans.
- Only buy birdseed in the largest size bags you can safely lift and store in the available space you have.
- Keep birdseed stored in a cool, dry place in a tight-lidded metal container.
- Monitor the birdseed usage at your feeders and make adjustments in the proportion of each seed fed as necessary. For example, cut back on white millet if you notice a lot of uneaten seeds underneath the feeders.
- Change your feeding based on time of the year and climate conditions. Heavy snow and cold will bring out more birds. And in the winter, you may get more ground feeding birds like Junco’s. So consider adding more millet and cracked corn then.

That’s it! I hope you’ve learned something that will help you get more out of your bird feeding hobby. Please recommend this report to others if you think they would enjoy reading it too. And keep an eye out for more tips and ideas in your email box.