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Keep Your Bird Feeder Safe

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GARDEN NOTES

KEEP YOUR BIRD FEEDER SAFE

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Feeding birds throughout the winter is both a humanitarian act and a way to bring birdwatching to your own back yard in the cold months. Bird food sales in the U.S. last year topped $200 million.

However, poorly maintained bird feeding stations may cause the birds you are trying to help, some real problems. Recently, there have been increasing reports of songbird diseases that have been spread through bird feeding, says Terry Messmer, Utah State University Extension Wildlife specialist.

According to the National Wildlife Health Center there are five diseases that affect birds which visit bird feeders, Messmer says. There diseases are Salmonellosis, Aspergillosis, Avian Pox, Trichomonias and Mycopalmosis. All of these diseases can lead to death either directly or indirectly, by making the bird more vulnerable to predators.

"You can spot a sick bird easily in a crowd. They appear less alert, less active, their feathers look unkempt, and they are often reluctant to fly away," Messmer says.

He suggests these preventative measures that will make for healthier birds and lesson the chance of spread of disease from your bird feeder.

- Give them space—Avoid crowding at bird feeders by providing ample feeders.
- Clean up wastes—Keep the feeder area clean of waste food and droppings. A broom and shovel will work, but a wet and dry vacuum is great.
- Make feeders physically safe—Use feeders with rounded corners. Feeders with sharp edges may cut birds thus allowing bacteria an opening to infect otherwise healthy birds.
- Keep feeders clean—Clean and disinfect feeders regularly. Use one part of liquid chlorine bleach in nine parts of warm water. Make enough solution to immerse empty feeders completely for 2-3 minutes. Allow the feeder to air dry. This should be done at least once a month.
- Use quality food—Discard food that smells musty, is wet, looks old, or has fungus growing on it. Clean and disinfect any storage containers or scoops that were used to store the feed to fill the feeders.

- Prevent contamination—Keep rodents and pets out of stored food. Rodents can carry and spread some bird diseases without being affected themselves.
- Spread the Word—Tell your bird feeding neighbors and friends about the risks. Since birds may use several feeders in a neighborhood, your feeder may not be safe until your neighbors' is.

Follow these precautions and you and your birds will continue to enjoy your bird feeding efforts, Messmer says.

For more information, contact your local **USU County Extension office.**

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