

BON APPETIT: ATTRACTING EARLY POLLINATORS TO THE GARDEN

By C.T. Ward, Frederick County Master Gardener, February, 2025

Winter is traditionally seen as the season of hibernation, but for the avid gardener, it is also a time for planning the upcoming year's garden. To maintain a healthy garden, whether veggies, flowers, or both, you can provide food and shelter for pollinators year-round. With some mindful planning, inviting pollinators into your garden early is easy and fun to do.

The Guests:

Remember that bees aren't the only pollinators! Most native insects, birds and mammals are just as important to the garden. While most insects hibernate in the winter, mammals and birds will visit throughout the year. As noted by Rebecca Self on the "Natural Habitat Adventures Blog," 90 percent of wild plants, 75 percent of all global crops, and over half of our raw materials, oils, fibers, and mouthfuls of food are dependent on diverse animal pollination. So it follows that garden diners of all species will be interested in diverse foods and shelters.

The Menu:

Like humans, our pollinator friends enjoy a wide variety of food. Protein is always the optimal choice. With nuts, mealworms, suet, and seeds, birds and mammals stay full longer; plus, the protein helps keep them warm. If a squirrel or a brave deer raids the seed, just add a good mix of hot pepper flakes or cayenne to deter mammals. The birds, lacking taste buds, will never notice.

If croutons or nuts, oats or seed become stale, dry, or flavorless, the birds won't mind! However, never feed any creature rancid or moldy food. This guideline also goes for fruit. Raisins or bruised fruit that isn't moldy is a great treat for early migrants like robins.

While focusing on proteins, keep carbohydrates to a minimum. Too much simple sugar from grains and processed food can seriously hurt their health. Occasional starches are okay, but their main diet should not habitually contain carbohydrates or starches.

Ambiance:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services website comments, "let logs be and save the snags." The more variety of spaces you have in your yard and garden for feasting, the better. Everything from logs and snags to stems of native plants and leaf litter are perfect places in which bugs, caterpillars, bees, and birds can feast and take shelter during winter.

Feed your pollinators once a day, preferably early in the morning, and make sure that feeders, watering spots, and suet and mealworm cages are clean. Even in the winter, disease can spread. When using feeders, provide both open and slightly sheltered spots, whether hanging feeders/cages or, in the case of nuts, fruit, and the occasional chunks of stale bread, in small piles on the ground. Remember that if the critters have to work for it, they will most likely pass it up.

Most importantly, place your food offerings in a place that gets little human trafficking and is relatively quiet. Animals like to eat in peace, too.

The Bill:

It cannot be stressed enough: please do not overspend. Wild animals are acclimated to these lean feeding times during the winter and will not starve to death if extra options aren't provided. Your goal in setting out food is to help attract a diverse variety of pollinators to your growing areas and help them establish a habit of stopping by for food. When spring comes, they will feast from the bounties in your garden. Choose quality over quantity.

A great way to help any financial burden is to plant natives and winterize them properly by leaving stems, seed pods, and leaves alone. Having a variety of early- and late-blooming natives helps support pollinators naturally and efficiently. Plus, they keep pollinators active in your garden when most plants aren't ready to face the outdoors just yet.

Feeding pollinators, a variety of offerings is key to maintaining a balanced ecosystem. And it equally produces an enjoyable outcome. After refreshing the feeders, sprinkling some peanuts in piles, and warming up the bird bath, my cat and I often sit in a cozy chair and watch the birds and squirrels through the nearby window.

When planned out, the effort in caring for our local flora and fauna is equally enjoyable and rewarding all year. And just as plants produce the brightest blooms when given proper nutrients and care, our pollinators, whether feathered or furred, will visit your garden again and again, pollinating your veggies and flowers!

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- Frederick County Extension Master Gardeners' website, <bit.ly/FCMG-Home-Gardening>;
- Facebook, <https://bit.ly/FCMGFacebook>;
- Instagram, <https://bit.ly/FCMGinstagram>
- University of Maryland Extension Home and Garden Information Center, bit.ly/UME-HGIC;
- Frederick County Master Gardeners publications, <<http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening>>.



A male bluebird feasts on one of its favorite foods, (dead) mealy worms, in Yorktown, Virginia, January 2024. (Photo courtesy of Maritta Perry Grau)

Can you guess what species this is? Answers have varied from a female house finch to a song sparrow; it was seen foraging for food under the snow in January 2025. (Photo courtesy of Maritta Perry Grau)



Slate Junco

A male slate junco searches for seeds in the snow in January 2025. Slate juncos are sometimes confused with tufted titmice, but while both are dark-colored with a white underbelly, the junco is very dark gray, has a yellow beak, and does not have a feathery tuft on its head. (Photo courtesy of Maritta Perry Grau)

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