

## Attract More Birds by Offering a Variety of Seeds, Feeding Locations

Ron Johnson, Ph.D.  
UNL Wildlife Specialist

Backyards in Nebraska are common feeding sites for at least 15 to 20 species of birds. In addition to the trees, shrubs and flowers that provide basic habitat, adding a bird feeder can bring birds out and close where you can see them. To enjoy observing such great diversity when feeding birds, it is important to offer a variety of food sources in a safe, versatile location.

Bird diets can range from seeds and fruit to insects or nectar. But regardless of these preferences, your feeder will attract more birds if the food is in place before the first cold spell. In fact, when severe weather strikes for several days in a row, supplemental food can increase survival rates, mostly because natural food sources are covered in snow and ice or just not available.

Extreme weather conditions create a need for protection against the wind as well. An ideal location for feeders is an open area sheltered from strong winds and within 10 feet of cover. Not only does this provide protection from the weather but a place for quick escape from predators as well.

It is a good idea to keep feeders a safe distance from windows to help decrease the occurrence of window collisions. Alternatively, placing feeders fairly close to windows can prevent injuries because the birds can see the window or, if they should strike the window when taking off from the feeder, they won't be flying very fast. Birds often see windows as an open flight path when fleeing from feeders.



Soni Cochran, UNL Extension in Lancaster County

Feeders can be bought commercially or made at home. A good feeder should protect the seed from rain and snow, dispense feed gradually to reduce spillage and be easy to clean and fill. Hopper-style feeders are most common, but other types include specialty feeders for thistle seed and counterbalanced perch feeders. Some feeders are designed to sit near ground level, while others can be hung aboveground or mounted.

Remember to keep bird feeders clean and disinfect them on a regular basis. Disease is more likely to spread in areas where a large number of birds congregate. Remove wet food and keep spilled seed and hulls raked to prevent the growth of mold.

There is a wide variety of

seeds to choose from. The most widely preferred seed is small, black oil-type sunflower seeds because they are high in energy and have thin, easy to crack shells. However, white proso millet, finely cracked corn, safflower and unsalted nutmeats also are good options to try.

Regardless of the specific seeds used, all feed needs to be fresh. Oftentimes commercially packaged mixtures are convenient but contain high amounts of filler seed that go to waste. It often is a better option to buy quality seeds that birds will prefer in bulk and mix at home. Fresh bulk seed is most commonly found at stores that specialize in feeding birds.

Grit and suet are two optional supplements that may increase the likelihood of birds visiting a feeder. Grit is used in the gizzard of birds to grind down feed and also serves as a source of calcium. Sand, fine poultry or canary grit, eggshells or crushed limestone can be mixed with the seed or placed on a tray on the ground.

Suet or hard beef fat is available in commercial no-melt packages or directly from the butcher or grocery meat counter. Mixtures made of animal fat mixed with other ingredients like seeds or nutmeats are an excellent source of energy for birds over the winter months. Suet can be fed in onion or orange sacks and in suet feeders on or near trees and wooden posts. Keep suet high and out of the sun to prevent melting.

Overall, it is fun and educational to experiment with different food in various locations to determine what best suits the area and interest level.

## Commercial Vineyards in Nebraska

Paul E. Read  
UNL Professor of Horticulture/Viticulture  
and Stephen Gamet, Research Technologist  
UNL Viticulture Program Department of  
Agronomy and Horticulture

Note: This is first of a series of articles related to commercial vineyards in Nebraska.



In recent years, there has been a tremendous increase in interest in grape production and winery development in Nebraska and the Midwest. This increased interest has led to a need for detailed information requisite to vineyard establishment. For a winery to be successful, it must have a ready source of consistently high-quality fruit available every year. Fortunately for Nebraska growers, there are many locations offering resources of quality soil, water and abundant sunshine. Experience of growers and University research has demonstrated there are many sites suitable for growing grapes of excellent quality that can be made into wines of exceptional quality.

Do your homework! Before embarking upon the potentially-risky venture of growing grapes, garner as much information as you can. Read trade journals and research articles, attend grower workshops and conferences, visit other growers' vineyards and discuss their approaches and take advantage of their experience. Focus your research on Midwest regional resources, ask questions and study some more. Develop a business plan that will give you a road map of where you are going and how you will get there; where do you want to be in five years, in 10 years? Viticulture (the culture of grape growing) is unlike most other types of agriculture, thus it is critical you "do your homework."

In the coming months, we will highlight some of the critical aspects of growing grapes.

## Easy Care Houseplants

Usually when you hear the phrase "easy care houseplant" snake plant, pothos and other plants with low-light requirements come to mind, and with good reason. Light is the factor that most often limits plant growth indoors, particularly in fall and winter when days are short.

But there's another whole category of plants that are easy to care for indoors—not due to their modest light requirements, but because they can sit a long time between waterings with no ill effects. They aren't sensitive to low-relative humidity. These are succulents, which are defined by their specialized moisture-holding tissue allowing them, in nature, to conserve water for days, weeks, months or longer. It's a survival mechanism allowing plants to survive and even thrive in harsh desert-like environments and situations where rainfall may be plentiful one season, then non-existent the rest of the year.

Cacti are perhaps the best known succulents. Their typical globe-like or cylindrical shape allows them a favorable ratio of moisture-holding inner tissue to outer tissue that can lose moisture more readily to sun and drying winds. In nature, opuntias (prickly pears) grow so their flat vertical "pads" are oriented to present the thin side towards the predominantly sunniest exposure.

The ridged or pleated appearance of many cacti allows them to expand and contract, depending on how much moisture they are storing. It also allows for a larger photosynthetic surface, while still enclosing a critical mass of moisture-holding tissue. Even their thorns, barbs and woolly hairs are thought to collect morning dew and protect them from drying.

Though cacti are easy to grow indoors, most require lots of bright light to maintain their original shape. Almost all indoor gardeners have had the experience of buying a healthy, small cylindrical cactus (or receiving one as a gift), only to find the new growth that developed was noticeably slimmer than the original. While hardly the end of the world, it's not terribly attractive.

Cacti are only one group of succulent houseplants. Calbeet, a large group. The following list includes several other popular houseplants, all of them succulents with more modest light requirements than most true cacti. Each is definitely easy-to-grow.

- Jade Plant
- Aloe vera
- Ovalleaf Peperomia
- Snake Plant
- Ponytail Palm
- ZZ Plant



Reiger begonia



C. macrocarpa "Goldcrest" cypress

## Begonias

Reiger begonias are popular house plants that flower more or less continually. Their flowers resemble those of wax begonias except in size and variety of color; Reiger begonia flowers are about twice as large and come in shades of red, pink, salmon, orange and yellow. After several months of flowering indoors, they may need their long stems cut back. New growth will emerge soon and flowering begins again in three to four months.

## Indoor Conifers

Very few conifers have been studied for potential use as house plants. For many years, the Norfolk Island pine (*Araucaria heterophylla*) and the Australian bunya-bunya (*A. bidwillii*) have been the only needled evergreens commonly suggested for growing indoors. Several cypresses, however, are proving equally good in home environments. The columnar Italian cypress (*Cypressus sempervirens* 'Stricta') is a graceful, very narrow tree, probably the most narrow and rigidly upright of all conifers. The other, *C. macrocarpa* 'Goldcrest,' a cultivar of the Monterey cypress native to California, is widely grown there and in Europe in coastal gardens as specimens, hedges, windbreaks and topiary. Both these plants are hardy only to about 10 degrees F, so they are grown outdoors only in warm climates.