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# The Grapevine

## Winter Care of Tools

The weather forecast for this week is positively beautiful when compared to last week's cold weather. Unfortunately, while it is warmer outside, the forecast of rain does put a damper on being able to go outside and do anything in our garden. This makes next week the perfect time to do some prep work on our tools so you are ready when gardening season starts.

The first step with your tools is always to get them cleaned up. It's best to remove the soil from your tools right after you are finished using them, but that isn't always possible. Soap and water are an easy way to remove dirt from any tool. For stubborn dirt or dirt in small creases, use a wire brush or steel wool. If the tool is covered in sap you can use rubbing alcohol, mineral spirits, or a foaming bathroom cleanser.

The second step is to disinfect any tools to prevent the spread of diseases among your plants. Ideally, this step should be done after every use but that can be hard on tools. One of the easiest ways to clean your tools is by soaking them for 30 minutes in a diluted bleach solution containing 9 parts of water to 1 part of bleach. You can also wipe tools using 70 to 100% rubbing alcohol. Once the tools are clean and disinfected you can sharpen your shovels and pruning tools. Sharp tools make any task easier, especially pruning or digging with a shovel.

The final step with tools is to inspect the handles and sand down any rough spots to prevent splinters. Treat the wooden handles with linseed or mineral oil to keep the wood strong and help the tools last longer. If you do have tools that need replacing, now is the time to do it before the growing season starts. Happy growing everyone!!



# Birdfeeding Troubleshooting Guide

Anyone who has fed the birds has experienced issues with their bird feeders ranging from no birds to sick birds and everything in between. While some of these issues can be simple to fix, others require a little effort and some thinking outside of the box. Let's go through the most common issues people have.

- **No birds at the feeder-** This one is the most complicated of the issues because there are multiple reasons that birds might not be coming to your feeder. One of the most common reasons birds aren't visiting the bird feeder is the abundance of naturally occurring food. In late fall and early winter, birds have plenty of food available versus late winter when food is buried under snow or gone. In this instance, you just have to wait. Other reasons why birds might not be at the feeders are covered below.
- **Predators-** Another reason birds might not be coming to your feeders is the presence of cats or birds of prey. The birds will avoid areas where predators are present but will return once they have moved on. Try to provide cover for birds to help them feel safe coming to your feeders. A simple way to provide this is using live Christmas trees tied around feeders to provide shelter. If the cat is yours, try to keep it indoors. It is estimated cats kill approximately 2.4 billion birds a year.
- **Not the birds you want-** Cardinals, goldfinch, and chickadees are all popular birds everyone wants to see at their feeders, but what if you are only getting sparrows or starlings? The issue likely is you are feeding the wrong kind of food in the wrong feeder. To attract the widest variety of birds a mix of black oil sunflower seed and proso millet is the best option. With birdseed, you get what you pay for. If you can only feed one type of bird seed, stick with black oil sunflower.



- **Sick birds-** Sanitation is vital when feeding the birds to prevent the spread of diseases among your visitors. Try to clean your feeders every couple of months, even in the winter. Empty all the bird seeds out of the feeders and wash well with soapy water. Follow up with a disinfectant solution of four ounces of chlorine bleach in one gallon of water. If you use wooden feeders, scrub the feeder with the bleach solution and then set the feeder in the sun to dry. The sun will help kill bacteria. If birds that appear ill start to come to your feeders take them down and wash them thoroughly. Leave the feeders down for several days before putting them back up.

- **Squirrels-** While some people find squirrels funny and entertaining, they can become bullies at the bird feeder, driving birds away and stuffing themselves for hours. Anyone who has tried to keep squirrels away from the feeders, yes, even with the "squirrel-proof" ones, knows how ingenious they can be at overcoming all our ideas. One way to keep squirrels away from your feeders is to feed them elsewhere. Squirrels love corn, provide ears of corn elsewhere in your yard to keep them away from the feeders. Attach the corn cob to a post or a feeder otherwise, it will quickly wander off. Another option is to mix ground chili pepper with your bird seed to discourage squirrels. Birds lack the taste receptors to taste the chili powder so it doesn't bother them.
- **Nuisance Animals-** While squirrels can be a pain, they are not the only animals you might have issues with. Raccoons, opossums, skunks, and even deer can be a problem with your feeders. Ground chili pepper Raccoons are the most destructive of the critters that might visit your and the most resourceful. One option to prevent raccoons from knocking over the feeders is to bring them inside every night. Raccoons also do not like getting greasy so using lithium grease on the poles or posts should help deter them. Opossums are not as common at bird feeders as other animals but their habit of defecating in the feeders is a problem since the birds won't eat from the feeder till it's cleaned. Luckily they are easy to keep from most hanging feeders. Skunks are usually only attracted to the insects that feed on the seeds left on the ground. Cleaning the seed hulls up regularly should discourage them from visiting your feeders. Deer are typically not an issue but, they can knock over the feeders trying to eat bird seed.

Feeding the birds can be a wonderful experience, just remember that you put out a buffet and invited everyone in the neighborhood to come and visit. Don't be surprised if a few critters you don't want show up from time to time. Luckily most of those problems can be fixed with just a little bit of work.

# Making Homemade Suet Cakes

Feeding the birds is a favorite activity for about 57 million people in the United States. A common question I find circulating social media is feeding birds oats soaked in bacon grease. Please help stop this unsafe practice. Birds should only eat rendered suet. Rendered suet won't turn rancid or melt as quickly in hot weather. Soft fats and oils can transfer onto the bird's feathers and interfere with their ability to utilize them for insulation and flight. Salt, as would be found in most cooking grease, is bad for birds for birds.

According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, "bacon drippings are animal fat just like suet, and many birds will eat it. But bacon virtually always has detectable amounts of nitrosamines, carcinogenic compounds formed from some of the preservatives used in bacon. In particular, the very high cooking temperatures used to fry bacon are conducive to nitrosamine formation. So even though birds love it, bacon and bacon fat pose too much of a risk to the long-term health of birds to warrant using it." Here are some recipes for you to make homemade suet this winter. (In the following recipes please **do not** substitute hardened vegetable products for lard or suet).



## Simple Mix

Take unprocessed suet and heat over low heat until melted. Carefully skim all un-melted materials off the surface of the melted suet. Allow the suet to cool slightly. Fill one-pound margarine tubs 1/2 to 2/3 full of birdseed. Carefully fill the container to fill with melted suet. Allow the suet mixture to harden in a cool location such as an unheated garage. Remove from container and place in suet feeder.

## Hard Mix

- 2 cups suet
- 1 cup peanut butter
- 2 cups yellow cornmeal
- 2 cups finely cracked corn

Melt suet, let it cool, then reheat. Add peanut butter, stirring well; mix in dry ingredients. Pour into molds and cool OR pour into a cake pan, cool, and then cut to size for suet feeders.

The colder the weather, the more attractive suet becomes to many species of birds, including Brown Thrashers and Northern Mockingbirds. Raw suet can be purchased online or you can contact local packing plants to see if they have it for sale. Making suet can be a smelly process, just ask my husband. I recommend doing it outside in a warm garage or on a warm day to prevent the smell from permeating your household.

## Soft Mix

- 1 cup suet
- 1 cup peanut butter
- 3 cups yellow cornmeal
- 1/2 cup all-purpose flour

In a saucepan over low heat, melt the suet, add peanut butter, and mix well. Mix cornmeal and flour in a separate bowl and add to the suet/peanut butter mixture after it starts to cool and thicken. Smear this mixture on pine cones or tree bark or pack it into suet baskets.

## Basic Mix

- 1 cup melted fat (suet or lard)
- 1 cup peanut butter
- 6 cups cornmeal

Mix this all together and add bird feed, seeds, nuts or raisins, as desired. Pour into molds or pack into feeders.



## Upcoming Events

### Garden Hour Webinars:

January 8<sup>th</sup>- A Beginners Guide to Gardening in Kansas

February 5<sup>th</sup>- Maximizing Irrigation Efficiency with Drip Irrigation

## Upcoming Events:

February 8<sup>th</sup> at 9:30 am Sustainable Landscaping with Rain Barrel Clinic at Andover Library

February 12<sup>th</sup> at 6 pm Seed Starting Success at the Bradford Memorial Library

February 13<sup>th</sup> at 6 pm Winter Blues and Winter Greens at the Andover Library

February 22<sup>nd</sup> at 9 am Sustainable Landscaping with Rain Barrel Clinic at Butler Community Building

## Cranberry and Spinach Sweet Potatoes



If you love Sweet Potatoes this sweet recipe is perfect for you this winter. Brought to us by the Alabama Extension as part of their Live Well Alabama series this recipe looks really tasty. Eat the potatoes with the peel to get more fiber, iron, and potassium.

### Ingredients

- Cooking spray
- 4 medium sweet potatoes
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 6 cups fresh spinach
- 4 tablespoons dried cranberries
- 1/3 cup pecans, chopped

### Directions

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees F. Line the baking sheet with foil. Spray foil with cooking spray.
2. Pierce each sweet potato a few times with a knife, and bake on a baking sheet for 50 minutes or until soft. Allow sweet potatoes to cool slightly.
3. When sweet potatoes have about 15 minutes left to cook, prepare spinach. Add oil, garlic powder, and spinach to skillet. Sauté until spinach is wilted (2 to 3 minutes).
4. Let potatoes cool slightly, carefully slice them open from end to end, but do not slice through the bottom of the potato. Use a fork to lightly mash the insides. Divide the spinach among the four potatoes. Top each potato with cranberries and pecans.

Source: <https://www.aces.edu/blog/topics/by-ingredients/live-well-alabama-cranberry-and-spinach-sweet-potatoes/>





#KSTATEGARDENHOUR

# K-STATE GARDEN HOUR

## 2025 New Year Launch

First Wednesday of the Month

12:00 PM- 1:00 PM CST

**January 8th\***- Sowing Success: Research-Based Gardening for Beginners *\*(second Wednesday)*

**February 5th**- Maximizing Water Efficiency Through Drip Irrigation

**March 5th**- Establishing a Native Prairie Stand at Home

The K-State Garden Hour is a free webinar series hosted by K-State Research and Extension horticulture staff across the state. We hope you'll join us on the first Wednesday of each month as we discuss new and relevant gardening topics. The presentations will be given live from Noon to 1:00 pm CST with a 45-minute presentation and 10-15 minutes for questions and answers. Sessions will be recorded and posted to the website after each event. Your one-time registration will allow you to participate live in any of the featured presentations within the 2025 K-State Garden Hour series.

**\*January Webinar postponed one week, until January 8th, due to the federal holiday.**



Register Here!

Please register for this free Zoom Webinar at:  
[ksre-learn.com/KStateGardenHour](https://ksre-learn.com/KStateGardenHour)

