Even the most basic of bird feeders can add lively and humorous splashes of color to your backyard.

Winter Feeder Basics

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A sassy chickadee dressed in black top hat and morning suit drops down to the tray feeder, snatches a single black oil sunflower seed and darts back to the safety of the tree to eat it.

Holding the seed between his feet, he taps it with the chisel of his slender beak until the husk falls away then deftly catches the calorie-rich kernel inside. He plunges back to the feeder again and again, prattling a buzzy "dee-dee-dee" to his neighbors. He's part of a small, mixed flock that includes black-capped chickadees, tufted titmice, white-breasted nuthatches and a downy woodpecker—all in various shades of black and white and gray. Peacefully coexisting, sharing the bounty of the feeder, they are always chatting and constantly in motion.

A blue jay swoops onto the tray, scattering seeds and songbirds, and greedily gobbles a throat full of seeds, dashing away to hide them. He's forgiven for his somewhat boorish behavior because his striking plumage is the deep azure and fluffy white of a summer sky. The instant he departs the scene, the chickadees reappear until the brash and raucous jay returns. And so goes the day.

Most of the little birds have settled into the shrubs for the night when lavender twilight paints the snow, so the feeder belongs to several pairs of cardinals. Spacing themselves evenly around the feeder, they quietly fill their crops for the night, crimson males glowing even in the dim light.

Attractive, homemade bird feeders can be easily rigged together using scrap lumber and a clean 3-pound coffee can. Here, a colorful male rose-breasted grosbeak samples tasty seeds.

Bird feeders add color and movement to a back yard on even the most somber winter days. Open to anyone and requiring a relatively small investment of time and money, feeding birds is the fastest growing hobby in the Unit-

Black oil sunflower seeds (above) are high in food value and attract a diversity of bird species. Easy-to-make peanut butter pine cone feeders (left) attract woodpeckers, chickadees and nuthatches.

ed States, second only to gardening. Even a single feeder offering a single seed type will attract a handsome and interesting variety of species within easy viewing range.

It may seem there is a bewildering selection of feeders, but choosing a feeder is as simple as deciding what kinds of birds you wish to attract. Simply furnish the right food in the right feeder to invite the birds you want.

If you are going to offer only one type of food on one feeder, black oil sunflower seeds—the number-one choice of many songbirds—on a tray feeder would be the best choice. Although all types of sunflower seeds will be readily eaten, birds prefer black oil sunflower seeds (solid black hull) over the striped variety as it is highest in food value. Bird enthusiasts favor the black oil seeds because its thinner husks leave the least amount of waste.

Tray feeders are open platforms on which the seeds are scattered. This may be as simple as a board on a short pole for easiest cleaning, or it may include a hopper that dispenses food, requiring less frequent filling. Drainage holes in the bottom of the tray will keep the seeds from sitting in rain water and molding before they are eaten. Chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, blue jays and downy and red-bellied woodpeckers prefer sunflower seed on a tray feeder. Northern cardinal, dark-eyed junco, rufous-sided towhee and mourning dove can be included by mounting the feeder near the ground.

Although birds will readily eat seed off the ground, it should always be dispensed from a feeder. Putting seed directly on the ground will eventually cause seed to be mixed with an unhealthy concentration of bird droppings and mold. Feeders should be regularly cleaned to reduce the spread of disease among birds.

To increase the variety of birds attracted to a feeding station, a mixed seed high in millet is often added to sunflower seed. White-throated, white-crowned, song, chipping and American tree sparrows, common grackles and red-winged blackbirds may be lured with mixed seed. Avoid purchasing mixes that include milo and wheat as these are used as fillers to keep prices low and are not readily eaten.

Peanuts, peanut butter and a peanut butter-based suet provide birds a diet high in protein and fat.

Insect-eating birds can be enticed to your backyard with a suet feeder. Beef suet is a hard fat found near the kidneys and loins that can be purchased from the butcher and rendered at home, or purchased in ready-made suet cakes. Suet (or peanut butter) can be stuffed into a small hanging log drilled with holes, smeared directly on a tree trunk or placed inside a plastic coated wire or wooden suet feeder. Downy and red-bellied woodpeckers, yellow-bellied sap-suckers, chickadees, titmice and nuthatches all appreciate suet. Provide suet only during cold weather as it spoils quickly in the heat.

Suet can be provided in ready-made cakes or hanging bags, but many people opt to make their own feeders from tuna cans or by drilling holes in a small log.

Niger, sometimes called "thistle," is a tiny, black, high-fat and high-protein seed imported from Ethiopia and India that is preferred by finches. Although more expensive than other seed, niger offers many seeds per pound and yields little waste. Niger is usually distributed from a tube feeder—a cylindrical tube with small ports and perches along its length. These feeders have tiny holes that reduce spillage and make the seed available to small-billed finches. Niger is a favorite of American goldfinches, house and purple finches, and pine siskins. Mourning doves and dark-eyed juncos often visit the ground below a niger feeder to claim dropped seeds.

When choosing your feeder, consider which birds you wish to attract and the amount of time (filling and cleaning) and money you want to invest.

Hang your feeder where it can be seen from your favorite perch, then sit back and enjoy the colorful show.

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Adding niger feeders to your feeder system will draw purple finches, goldfinches, pine siskins, redpolls and a few other small birds.