

Adding Variety To Your Bird's Diet

Once you find something, anything, they eat, you can always try and add items.

3-1-2004

By Penny Corbett

My breeding birds are on seed-only diets. How can I get them to eat better foods? I have tried different things, but they won't eat it. I don't want to waste money on foods they will not eat.

This has been said time and time again: birds do not eat what they do not recognize as food. Offering an item once or twice is not enough to decide the bird doesn't like it. It may take weeks, months or longer for a bird to try and eat different things. If something you never saw before was placed in front of you, would you know what it was and what you were supposed to do with it? Would you automatically eat anything that was put on a plate before you? Have you ever experienced someone saying they didn't like something they never ate? The same is true for birds. You can improve your birds' diet. There is no secret to it, you just have to do it. It takes work, time and patience. The time to start is right now, not tomorrow, next week or next month. Start now or it will be put off and it will not happen.

Many people overfeed their birds. By overfeeding you are ensuring they only need to eat their favorites without ever having to try anything else in the dish. If your birds are supplied with more food than they can eat during the day, consider cutting back the amount of food you are feeding. I am not telling you to starve or under feed your birds, just cut back on the overfeeding. Parent birds feeding chicks will try and eat things during the feeding period they would not normally. Take advantage of this time to introduce new foods.

New Diet Strategies There are several ways to approach improving a bird's diet. Many of the smaller birds, such as finches, canaries, budgies, cockatiels and lovebirds, will accept greens with little or no effort (when referring to greens I do not mean iceberg lettuce). With some of the larger birds, it may take a little more time. You can start by placing greens (wash and drain well) on top of their food. They already know this is the dish that contains their food. Placing greens in a separate dish in another location in the cage may not work because it is not the normal food dish and feeding spot. Greens can also be attached to or woven through the sidebars of the cage at beak level. Birds have a tendency to pick at things right in front of their face.

You can try growing some of their seed in a plastic lid using safe soil without fertilizer. When the seeds get about 1½ to 2 inches, place the entire container on the cage floor. For budgies, it might help to lightly sprinkle the greens first with water. Sprouted seeds are another option. Seed-eating birds are already familiar with the seeds they are eating. Sprout some of their seed and feed it just as it starts to grow.

The Green Approach There is no need to make this an expensive effort. You can grow some of the greens with little effort. Some of the best greens are considered weeds like dandelion. If you are growing or picking greens, vegetables, fruit, etc. make sure they are free of chemicals. Store-bought greens and veggies must also be washed thoroughly.

When you are preparing dinner, hold a little on the side for your birds. A piece or two is all you need to start with. If they eat it, you can give them more next time. If they do not, you did not waste very much. The basic nutrition rules are the same for birds as they are for us. Eat veggies. Dark green leafy and yellow/orange vegetables are some of the best. Don't forget the mashed potatoes, pastas, etc. Hold the sauces and gravies — no need to add extra fat to their diet. Before you consume the entire pizza, offer a piece of the crust to a pair or two. You can offer your chicks a wide variety of food items as they are weaning when they are learning and experiencing new things. Introduction to a good basic diet at this stage will provide them with a good nutritional start to life.

Size, Shape and Texture Some birds are attracted to certain colors. Use this preference in your favor by offering food items in that color or color family. If you have a bird that favors red, try offering veggies that are red. Many of the bigger birds relish a fresh hot chili pepper.

The size, shape and texture can also make the difference in a food item being consumed or tossed to the floor. If you are trying to feed carrots, consider the different possibilities — fresh carrot pieces, baby carrots, sliced, grated, shredded, steamed or cooked. There are birds that prefer warm foods to cold or room temperature. They may eat their carrots steamed or cooked, but not fresh. Some will only eat slices, while others, only sticks. They are no different than we are, each with their own preferences.

Most birds will eat corn on the cob, so give it a try. Offer the cob in pieces or cut it into wheels. If they eat it on the cob, see if they will eat thawed, frozen corn. If you are successful with that, try adding other veggies to the corn such as carrots or peas. Once you find something, anything, they eat, you can always try and add items. The kabobs made to hang in a cage for veggies and fruit may be the key to success.

Bean mixes are another great place to start. Place warm bean mix in the cage. I prefer to place it right on top of the normal food because they are already accustomed to eating there. You can also put it into a small dish or on paper plates so as not to foul the food. When they start eating the bean mix, you can add many things to it from different veggies to pellets. Simply changing the texture and/or temperature of the pellets can be inviting for a bird to try them. Try lightly soaked or soaked and warmed pellets as an offering to your pairs.

Apples alone are not the most nutritious of foods because few birds eat the skin. However, it is something other than seed, a start in itself, and can again be used as a vessel to get your birds to eat other things. Before offering the piece of apple, embed pieces of pellets into it. As the bird eats the apple, it gets a taste of the pellets and realizes they are food and not so bad after all.

Penny J. Corbett has bred and kept birds for more than 30 years. She has bred several species including hookbills, softbills, canaries and finches. Corbett serves as Judge of American Budgies and Pet Birds in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York areas. She has also been given numerous awards for her own birds, and she has received several bird breeding awards.