

The Truth About Organic Food & Pet Birds

The growing trend of owners providing their pet birds with an organic diet by offering foods with no additives or preservatives gives more control over what their pet birds consume.

By Susan Chamberlain

Some bird owners are noticing that their birds seem sensitive to certain ingredients in foods, including coloring, preservatives and even nutritional additives. BIRD TALK reader Sandy Lamboy of Norwalk, W.I., chooses spirulina-free organics for her Eclectus parrot. "Eclectus parrots are prone to toe-tapping," she said. "They have highly sensitive digestive tracts, and it has been thought that additives and preservatives may contribute to this syndrome. Organic food seems to be the best solution for my bird."

Organic bird food is definitely on the upswing, and discriminating consumers are the driving force behind the trend.

The term organic refers to food grown or raised according to the Organic Foods Production Act. It is produced without the use of most pesticides, artificial fertilizers, sewage sludge, bioengineering or ionizing radiation. Organic growing methods promote ecological integrity and emphasize the use of renewable resources.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture specifies standards that foods must meet in order to be labeled organic, and farms, as well as companies that handle the processing of the food must be inspected to ensure they meet USDA standards. When a product is certified organic, an organization accredited by the USDA verified that the product met these standards. Visit www.ams.usda.gov for more information on the USDA's National Organic Program.

Products must be at least 95 percent organic to earn the USDA Organic seal. The USDA does not guarantee or claim, however, that organic foods are more nutritious or safer to eat than non-organics.

Check The Label — Twice

Read package labels carefully. In some instances, birds can be sensitive to harmless ingredients in organic pellets, such as corn, soy or peanuts. Roudybush has introduced a rice-based diet as an alternative to ingredients that may cause sensitivities in certain birds.

The first ingredient listed on product labels is the most dominant. If your bird seems to have a food allergy or other form of dietary intolerance, consult an avian veterinarian before treating your bird or radically changing its diet.

Remember that "natural" and "organic" are not synonymous. "Natural" may appear on food labels but does not mean the food is certified organic, and the food does not have to meet standards the way that "organic" does for a label. It usually means that no artificial additives or coloring were used in its production.

Terri Pakula of Hewlett, N.Y., feeds her birds a combination of organic seed and pellets as well as nonorganic foods: "I like the natural colored pellets. The cockatiels eat them, but my Senegal parrot, Jessie, won't touch them. I sprout their seeds so they're always nice and fresh. I like the idea that we're moving away from additives and preservatives, but my birds eat both organic and nonorganic food and seem very healthy."

Pet store bird department manager and former breeder Barbara Landsperg of Valley Stream, N.Y., sprouts food for her birds, too. "I use organic seed mixes, and most contain soybean products and/or dry beans," she said. "I remove the beans and sprout them, making them highly palatable and nutritious for the birds." Landsperg provides organic products because she likes the idea of her birds "getting their nutrients from the actual food instead of additives."

Handling Organic Foods

Organics might require some special handling to keep them at peak freshness. Because they do not contain artificial preservatives, the foods might be more vulnerable to mold. Molds grow easily on grain-based products whether they're organic or not, and aflatoxin poisoning might pose more of an immediate threat to our birds than pesticides. Recently, a number of dogs in the United States died after consuming dog food contaminated with aflatoxins.

Store bird food according to the manufacturer's directions, particularly in a cool, dry area. Moisture can promote mold growth on food. I keep my birds' pellets and seed in glass jars and plastic containers in the pantry. Purchase only as much as you can use in a reasonable period of time, preferably about a month.

Discard uneaten portions of food daily. Splashed water, flung fruit and other soft foods and droppings can facilitate the growth of bacteria and mold on leftover seed or pellets. Wash your bird's dishes daily, and dry them before adding food. Don't forget to wash clips and rod-style skewers. Bits of remaining produce can host the growth of mold and bacteria.

Wash all produce carefully. Even though it is labeled organic, it remains vulnerable to contamination by insects, rodents and human hands. Produce contaminated by bacteria acquired during shipping or storage has caused human food poisoning cases. There are products on the market formulated specifically for washing fruit and vegetables, and you can find them in the produce section of your supermarket or in well-equipped pet shops. Vinegar followed by a clear water rinse and then a quick dry with a paper towel removes contaminants, too. If you offer fruit juice to your birds whether it is organic or not, read the label to be sure it has been pasteurized to kill bacteria.

Lambert offered some words to the wise on produce: "Examine fruit and vegetables carefully for freshness because organics may not sell quickly due to the higher price."

Organic choices for your birds include seed, pellets, dried fruit and vegetables and specialty foods, and pet stores are carrying an increasingly large variety of organics. Marc Morrone of Parrots of the World in Rockville Centre, N.Y., has seen an increased demand for these products. "Organic bird food customers are the people who eat organic food themselves. We sell organic pellets and organic seed mixes. It's a pet shop's responsibility to give customers a choice. I'd advise readers that when they pay the extra money for organic food, they make sure it's certified organic."

It's a great time of year to plant your own organic garden with tempting treats for your birds. Fast growing peas offer a natural foraging treat. You can be sure it's organic when you grow your own kale, carrots, beets, berries and other nutritious produce. It's easy on the budget, too.