

Kitchen Creation For Your Bird

The recipe for good bird health

By Susan Chamberlain

Prepare healthy food for your bird at home.
Courtesy Russ Jacobsohn, Tennessee

“There’s more bird food than people food in my refrigerator!”

Sound familiar? Sharing your home with a pet bird is something of an alternative lifestyle for most of us. Once a feathered friend moves in, our lives change forever.

Although birds aren’t difficult to care for, they do require some specialized attention, a few adjustments to your daily routine and some modifications to your home. Don’t be alarmed — it’s not as scary as it sounds!

The Kitchen

The kitchen is the hub of the home, and it is cuisine central for your bird as well. It is here that you’ll store and prepare your bird’s food, change its water and wash its dishes. All this can be done without causing a kitchen crisis.

Birds do not live by seed alone. They require a broad-based diet comprised of formulated pellets or a pellet and seed mixture, fruit and vegetables and some table food, such as pasta. vitamin-A deficiencies are often prevalent in pet birds so it important to offer vegetables like broccoli, sweet potatoes, carrots and kale, which are good sources of this important vitamin.

Sweet potatoes are high in vitamin A and also contain carbohydrates, vitamin C, folate, calcium, dietary fiber and potassium. Serve them to your bird cooked or raw. (Peel or scrub thoroughly first.)

Introduce young birds to mashed sweet potatoes so they’ll enjoy them all their lives. Even canaries love them. Discard sweet potatoes that have become moldy in the pantry, as cooking may not kill the spores.

Sweet potatoes and yams are actually two different vegetables. Both are tubers, but the sweet potato is native to South America, and the yam hails from Africa. The important difference is that, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture reports, only the true sweet potato contains vitamin A.

Calcium is an important component of the avian diet. Although exact nutritional requirements for every species are unknown, African grey parrots seem to have a greater need for calcium in the diet than other species. Egg-laying hens of all species must be provided with sufficient calcium for eggshell formation.

Some sources of calcium are broccoli, cooked navy beans, kale, cuttlebone or mineral blocks and yogurt. Broccoli contains calcium, vitamins A, K, B2 and C, and magnesium. Medium- and large-sized birds usually enjoy holding stalks of raw broccoli in a foot and nibbling on the florets. Budgies and other small birds accept it readily when it is secured to cage bars.

Fresh broccoli is nearly odorless. Avoid broccoli with a strong, unpleasant odor.

Your bird also requires carbohydrates, some fat, protein, other vitamins and minerals.

Carbohydrates are present in fruit, vegetables, pasta, rice, seed, and formulated bird diets. Small portions of nuts and seed provide plenty of fat for your pet. Good protein sources are cooked lean meat and cooked beans or occasionally, eggs. Because eggs are high in cholesterol, you may wish to use cholesterol-free egg substitutes.

Convert Your Bird To Pellets

Use these tips when introducing pellets to your pet bird's diet. [More>>](#)

Finicky Eater?

Does your small bird ignore its dish of carefully prepared fruit and vegetables? Encourage your pet to gnaw on carrots, broccoli, corn on the cob, apples and more by firmly attaching chunks of fresh produce to cage bars. Try some wet greens, too. Your bird will be attracted by the water droplets, and some species are leaf bathers and will instinctively rub against wet leaves to bathe. The next logical step for these birds is to begin nibbling on the greenery.

Larger birds may prefer to “work” for their food as well. String a variety of fresh produce on a skewer-type rod feeder, and hang it from cage bars.

It’s easy to get young birds to sample new foods, but older ones often have strong opinions about what they will or will not eat. Don’t give up. If, after several weeks, your pet still refuses to munch on carrots or broccoli, try serving them cooked or cut into different shapes.

For example, some birds refuse to eat carrots cut into slices but will eagerly pick up a carrot stick and begin gnawing on it. Others may ignore cooked peas but relish eating raw peas out of the pod.

Birds that hold food in their feet to eat may prefer banana slices with the skin left on so they can peel the fruit. (Make sure you thoroughly wash the banana peel before offering it to your bird.) It takes a little time and effort to learn your bird’s preferences, but it’s worth it.

Keep It Fresh and Clean

Purchase only as much bird food as you will use in a reasonable amount of time. This time frame will vary depending on the availability of certain foods in your area, climactic conditions and the number of birds sharing your home. Discard food that looks webby or moldy or emits an unpleasant odor. Store food in insect- and rodent-resistant containers. Many bird foods are now available in reusable canisters or buckets, resealable bags or plastic jars with screw-on tops for convenient storage.

Refrigerate perishables, and locate seed, pellets and treats in a cool, dry location. Streamline your bird care routine by reserving a cabinet or pantry shelf exclusively for bird food and dishes.

Remove uneaten soft foods from your bird’s cage after several hours. Replace seed and pellets at least once a day. Reduce waste by filling the bowl only about halfway. Birds may not dig down deeply for buried seed and pellets, or they may scatter food from an overflowing dish.

Water Sources

Provide fresh drinking water at all times. Change the water, and scrub the dish at least once a day or more often if your bird fouls the water with food, droppings and discarded toy parts.

Does your bird’s water dish resemble a little cesspool? Does your pet gleefully bathe in its fresh drinking water? Try placing the dish higher in the cage, and away from the food dish to discourage food dunking and unwanted bathing.

If this doesn’t work, a drinking water bottle may be the solution. Most birds, from finches to macaws, will quickly learn to drink from water bottles.

Barbara Landsperg, a bird shop professional and longtime bird owner, has been using both glass and plastic bottles with her birds for 30 years. “The bottles are sanitary,” she said. “Birds can’t poop in them or dump their food in them, but some birds learn to stuff seed or paper up the nozzles, so you have to check them often.”

Landsperg said it’s relatively easy to convert your bird to drinking from a bottle. “Place the water bottle right above the existing water dish so the bird’s head just touches it as he goes to drink the water from the dish. It will drip on his head, and he’ll notice it and eventually drink from it. Birds will also be attracted to the ball at the tip of the nozzle.

“Once the bird is actually drinking from the bottle, remove the dish (make sure your bird is reliably drinking from the water bottle before removing its water dish),” said Landsperg. “Adjust the bottle so the nozzle is at about beak height.”

Water bottles are not an excuse to neglect daily water changes. Landsperg advises her customers to change plain water at least every 48 hours and to replace vitamin-enhanced water daily. It’s also important to make sure bottles are securely

fastened to cage bars. “If they’re loose in their holders, birds may be able to manipulate them and dump them on the floor,” she said.

Keep it Sanitary

Use bottle brushes and tube brushes to clean your bird’s water bottle. Disinfect water bottles and tubes weekly by immersing them in a solution of 1 part household bleach and 10 parts water, for several minutes. Rinse well before returning them to your bird. All-steel drinking tubes may be sterilized by boiling them for a few minutes. Consult individual manufacturers for specific advice.

Viruses, bacteria, molds and other micro-organisms are everywhere. Wash your hands before handling your bird or preparing its food. Keep a separate cutting board just for preparing your bird’s fresh fruit and vegetables. Disinfect counters and other hard surfaces regularly.

Sponges, dishtowels and dishcloths are major sources of cross-contamination. Change towels daily, and use a disinfectant solution on sponges and cloths when wiping counters and other hard surfaces. Use paper towels when possible.

When it comes down to it, birds enjoy food as much as us humans, and, for some species, perhaps even more so. Even the most finicky bird is bound to catch on to the many great tastes and healthy selections on the avian menu — it’s just a matter of the right presentation and a little persistence.