

Leftovers For Wild Birds

Leftover food from your pet bird can be a delectable treat for your wild bird friends

By Susan Chamberlain

Place leftover food from your parrots outside as a treat for wild birds.

Q: I have a blue-fronted Amazon, and I feed it a varied seed mix. Would it be OK to put the leftovers in my wild bird feeder? With such a varied mix, about half of it remains uneaten each day. I would like to use this to spice up my outside feeder offerings, but I don't want to do so if it will harm any of my wild bird friends.

I can't imagine that putting leftover bird food of the type you've mentioned in your outdoor bird feeder would harm wild birds. I routinely collect my own birds' leftover pellets and seed in a plastic tub, and once or twice a week fill the outdoor bird feeders with the resulting mixture. I've been doing this for years, and aside from enjoying watching the cardinals, blue jays, finches, sparrows, crows, doves and even woodpeckers as they feast, I've noticed that I've got the fattest squirrels in town!

I do take a few precautions, though, for my own birds' health and safety as well as for their wild cousins:

1. Bird feeders are placed in a corner of my yard, as far away from the house as possible. I don't want to attract mice or wild birds to the house for various reasons. I wouldn't enjoy a mouse infestation, and wild birds fluttering around close to my bird room windows might frighten my pet birds or even shed contagious diseases or parasites.
2. Be mindful of the wild birds' safety. Locate the bird feeder in a somewhat open area, away from shrubbery that provides hiding places for cats, yet under sheltering tree branches so that the smaller birds are not easy prey for hawks.
3. Discard your pet bird's leftover soft foods as well as uneaten fruit and vegetables rather than feed them to the wild birds. If mixed with seed, these foods could easily contribute to the growth of fungi, mold and bacteria. When left uneaten for several hours, bacteria begins to proliferate on soft foods. You wouldn't want your own birds to eat them, so don't serve them to their wild counterparts either. Clean your wild bird feeders regularly.
4. Tend to your wild bird feeder as you do your own bird's dishes. Clean the feeder regularly, so it doesn't become fouled by built-up seed residue or bird droppings. It is especially important to clean open bird feeders after it rains, as moist seed may develop mold quite quickly.
5. Many birds are ground feeders and will only eat seed scattered on the soil or grass. Enough seed will be flung out of the feeder to make a nice meal for these guys, but how safe is your ground? Don't apply pesticides, flea treatments, fungicides, herbicides or other chemicals to your yard — and especially not to grass or plants surrounding the feeder. Birds can easily pick up the poisons as they forage through the seed on the ground.
6. Did you know that sunflower seed hulls inhibit plant growth? If you want lush greenery beneath your outdoor bird feeder, clean up the hulls regularly. Birds do not live by seed alone. Wild birds will feast on berries, fruit and other plants growing in the area, and many are also insectivorous, thus providing natural pest control for your yard.
7. Water is important. Provide a bird bath, and fill it with clean water daily. Wipe or hose out the interior of the bird bath every few days to remove sludge, debris and any algae that may have accumulated.
8. When you feed wild birds, bear in mind that they become dependent on the food source, so continue to offer sustenance year-round. If you must discontinue this practice, do so during summer, when their natural food is plentiful.