



Trim a Tree for Wildlife

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This Christmas why not trim a tree for our furred and feathered friends by using decorations you can make easily at home. The best thing about using this type of decoration is that you share your Christmas tree with the birds and squirrels. You can either decorate an evergreen tree outdoors in your yard, or you can decorate your own tree in your home, and then later after the holiday put it out in the yard. They'll appreciate the winter treats. These decorations not only look attractive, but help wildlife make it through the winter.

When choosing the birds diet, bear in mind that both birds and squirrels have high metabolisms and need loads of calories to help stay warm. Be sure to decorate the tree heavily!

All edible decorations should be hung with biodegradable materials, such as cotton string or thread. Some decorations would only be appropriate hung outside or hung on your inside tree after the holiday.

Begin with the old pinecone trick: Wind a cotton string around the pinecone scales and loop the end so that it can hang from the tree. Then mix peanut butter (thinned with a bit of vegetable oil) with birdseed and spread the mixture on the cones. Roll in more birdseed and hang. You can also use this mixture on rice cakes which have been punched with a toothpick to make a hole and threaded on cotton string with a loop at the end for hanging on the tree. Press in fresh grapes and sliced apples and coconut. Some birds, such as Brown Thrashers and Northern Mockingbirds, will enjoy dried apples and oranges. Cut fruit slices horizontally, perpendicular to the core or stem. Then either dry them in a food dehydrator or in a warm oven. Attach with cotton string and hang.

Garland strings of popcorn and cranberries are a traditional favorite for both humans and birds. Buy a bag of fresh cranberries in the produce department. With a needle and thread, string four or five pieces of popcorn, then one cranberry for a colorful red and white pattern. This is a good activity for children to do while watching a Christmas TV special.

Everyone knows squirrels enjoy nuts. Buy mixed nuts in the shell and drill a hole completely through the nut. Then feed a cotton string through the nut and tie a knot at the bottom. Hang individually on the tree rather than making a garland, and later a squirrel can pull them down one at a time to eat them.

Hang sections of dried yellow and colorful Indian corn on the tree by drilling a hole all the way through (not lengthwise) and hang with cotton string. Squirrels love these too.

Making your own suet and hanging in old onion bags works great for birds. One good recipe includes:

- 2 cups of fresh ground suet (rendered beef fat)
- 1 cup of peanut butter
- 2 cups of yellow corn meal
- 2 cups of birdseed
- 1 cup dried fruit pieces.

Melt suet in a pan over low heat. Allow to cool thoroughly; then re-heat it. Add peanut butter, stirring until well blended. Add dry ingredients to the mixture and blend well. Pour into cake pan or casserole dish and cool. Cut into squares and place in onion bag and hang.

Using recycled materials such as milk cartons and well-rinsed detergent bottles that have been decorated by the children make great feeders to hold birdseed or dried seeds from squash and melons.

Small bowls made from the cleaned rind of grapefruit or oranges also make good feeders. Cut the fruit in half and peel out the flesh to make a bowl. Punch four holes around the edges and tie with cotton string. After hanging on the tree, fill with mixed seed or thistle.

Millet, cracked corn and mixed birdseed should also be sprinkled on the ground around the tree for ground-feeding birds. In addition, drill holes in small logs (birch is especially pretty) and fill with suet or peanut butter mixed with cornmeal and oatmeal. Stack these under the tree.

Fill out your tree for the birds by hanging bunches of weeds that still have their seeds intact. Dock, lamb's quarters and some grasses are a few choices.

Shallow pans of fresh water will also be appreciated by the wildlife, and is equally important. Be sure to replace with fresh water as it freezes.

Making a wildlife Christmas tree is a great family activity for the holiday season. You'll spend some enjoyable time watching birds and small mammals feast on your Christmas gifts to them.