

Bird Feeders Adapt to Consumer Trends

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Style isn't all that's driving consumer demands for bird feeders this year.

Sharon Dunn, president of Duncraft, Concord, N.H., says her buyers stress function above appearance.

"They don't care what a bird feeder looks like," Dunn says. "They want it to really perform well."

A large part of that increased performance, says Dunn, is ease of cleaning and refilling. In response to that demand Duncraft has added an "EasyClean" feature to several of its products.

"We have introduced [the EasyClean feature] in all of our tube base feeders," Dunn said. "Folks who are buying the upper-end feeders are sensitive to that issue. If you have a feeder that can be disassembled very quickly, you can accommodate that need."

In part, the demand for functional feeders has been driven by recent findings released by the trade organization Wild Bird Feeding Industry. In those findings, Dr. David Bonter of Project Feeder Watch at Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology has found there is a danger of aflatoxins found in fungus sometimes present in wild bird seed mixes. Dr. Bonter recommends regular cleaning of feeders and feeding stations.

Gold Crest Distributing's line of spiral feeders will get a colorful facelift for 2005, featuring bright yellow and red accents.

"There has been some bad press," said Mel Toellner, president of Gold Crest Distributing, Mexico, Mo. "It's been blown out of proportion that we [wild bird enthusiasts] are not cleaning the feeders properly, so we're doing our best to make them easy to maintain."

Convenience in the form of less-frequent fill-ups is also high on the list of consumer expectations, says Toellner.

"I'm seeing growth for larger capacity feeders," he said. "People are busy, and they want to fill it and forget it."

Large hopper-style feeders are big selling items, says Dunn, in the wake of busier consumer lifestyles.

"One of the things that I see is that there are products with a wire basket, into which you drop a seed block," she said. "That's a product I've seen sell in regards to convenience."

Exclusionary feeders that allow only certain species to feed or keep out pests and predators have always been big sellers and will continue to hold their ground this year, says Brian Cunningham, product manager for Wild Birds Unlimited.

"Squirrel-proof feeders have done well across the board," he said.

Wendi Oliveros, marketing manager for the Havahart brand of bird feeders, manufactured by Woodstream Corp., Lititz, Pa., said Havahart makes wire grates that protect the seed from large birds and squirrels, as well as weight sensitive perches.

Recent findings have been released by the Wild Bird Feeding Industry (www.wbfi.org) featuring Dr. David Bonter, Project

Feeder Watch, Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology. Bonter has found there is evidence to suggest that there may be dangerous aflatoxins found in fungus sometimes present in wild bird seed mixes. The Royal Masterpiece feeder from Duncraft contains the EasyClean feature. In those findings, Dr. Bonter recommends the following measures to enthusiasts for regular cleaning of feeders and feeding stations:

1. Provide multiple feeding stations in different areas of your yard to disperse bird activity. Crowding at the feeder can cause stress, which may make birds more vulnerable to disease.
2. Use a rake to keep the area around your feeder clean.
3. Provide seeds from a feeder rather than scattering seed on the ground.
4. Move your feeding stations periodically, so there will be less concentration of bird droppings
5. Always wash your hands after filling or cleaning your feeders.
6. Clean and disinfect feeders regularly with a solution of one part liquid chlorine household bleach to nine parts tepid water (10% solution).
7. Keep seed clean, dry and watch that it doesn't get moldy in the feeder. Disinfect any storage container that may have held spoiled food.

"You can adjust the weight sensor to close (the seed ports) for larger birds or squirrels," she said.

Jennifer Masiello, marketing manager for bird feeder manufacturer Droll Yankees, Danielson, Conn., said her company has also added a squirrel-resistant bird feeder with an added twist-battery power. The weight sensitive device responds to a squirrel's pressure by flinging them into the air. The four feeders in this line are marketed for both their effectiveness and their entertainment factor.

Masiello said the company offers retailers a VHS or DVD video for in-store use showing these products in action "in a practical way and in a comical way, so the consumer can see the effectiveness of the product."

"Anti-squirrel products remain hot," said Toellner. "Our biggest growth has been with our Twirl-a-Squirrel product."

Another product that responds to consumer demand is the species-specific bird feeder that attracts only select birds, based on their ability to perch on the feeder. Toellner said the increase of sales of these products has been caused by increased education.

"As consumers are becoming more educated, people are smarter than that," Toellner said. "They are asking, 'What can I do to get these birds?'"

The Wingspan brand of Gold Crest Distributing's products includes a feeder that is designed to deter even the mightiest of pests. The "Bear-Proof" feeder, made of heavy cast metal, is meant to withstand attack from woodland creatures great and small.

Gold Crest Distributing's "Clinger" feeder excludes all but the smallest wild birds with its specially designed perch.

"There's not been a product like this for about a year, so there is a need for it," Toellner said.

An earth-friendly product is gaining in popularity for 2005 as well. Toellner said a line of feeders produced by Rubicon are made using recycled milk jugs, making the product durable and lower in price than traditional cedar products.

Function and maintenance aside, a continuing force in driving the production and sales of bird feeders is look, plain and simple.

"As you dissect a market, there are many trend lines going on at once," said Toellner.

Near the top of that list this year, says Toellner, is the garden decor appeal that many bird feeders have.

As people spend more time in their backyards, demand for products that are visually attractive has grown.

Droll Yankees offers a new polished pewter finish on eight of its tube feeders.

"Since the whole 9/11 situation, people would prefer to stay at home and enjoy their backyard environments," said Masiello. "People are looking for things that are aesthetically pleasing but not over the top."

Consumers are beginning to think of their outdoor spaces as extensions of their indoor spaces, says Oliveros.

"New products sell," Oliveros said. "We know that. People are thinking of their backyards like their homes. They want them to look good."

Manufacturers are also taking cues from other industries in the business of outdoor living, to create products that complement and cash in on existing trends.

"It's not just in terms of the design, but the finish, too," said Jonathan Kurts, marketing manager of Perky Pet, Denver, Colo. "You might have deck tables and furniture that are metal or powder coated. [Consumers] are looking for feeders that match. We're looking very strongly at what's out there in lawn furniture."

Finish is high on the list of changes for new bird feeder products this year.

The Metal Twist bird feeder from Havahart features a spiral tube with room for three types of seeds.

GoldCrest Distributing's line of spiral feeders will get a colorful facelift for 2005, featuring bright yellow and red accents. "That issue of color is hot right now," Toellner said. "They seem to be doing quite well right now."

Several companies will be reintroducing metal feeder models with powder-coated and polished surfaces.

"We've updated our classic line," Masiello said. "It's going from traditional to a powder-coat finish."

Masiello said Droll Yankees will also add a "polished pewter" upgrade to eight of its feeders in response to consumer trends toward more eye-catching products.

Oliveros said her company has created a line it calls Garden Radiance, which includes its best-selling Metal Twist feeder. It will add four more feeders to this line in 2005.

"Last year we came out with eight new bird feeders," she said. "We set out to make them decorative and functional. This is the epitome of both. It is decorative and easy to use."