

Winter Backyard Birdfeeding Strategies

The popularity of feeding backyard birds offers pond and water garden retailers increased business and sales.

09/29/09

Backyard birdfeeding ranks as the No. 2 outdoor hobby, second to gardening, according to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. "Given the popularity of feeding birds, any retailer has potential customers that will feed outdoor [visitors]," said Mike Wulf, national sales manager from D & D Commodities in Stephen, Minn.

Backyard birds are naturally attracted to water, so adding birdfood and birdfeeders increase the chances of repeat visitors. (Courtesy of Gold Crest Distributing)

Selling backyard birding products can extend the winter buying season for pond and water garden retailers. (Courtesy of Gold Crest Distributing)

Trevor Cole, owner of Across the Pond in Huntsville, Ala., said backyard birds represent a natural part of ponds and water gardening. "Anyone who puts a pond in his or her landscape knows that Mother Nature follows," Cole said. "Our wild bird products are in a separate area in the shop. To inspire our customers, we have an observation room with one-way mirrors where people can watch birds in our nature garden. In the winter, we have a wood-burning stove there, and people can stay warm and watch the birds feed."

Cole said he was not always confident about selling backyard birding products, but his distributor, Gold Crest Distributing in Mexico, Mo., answered all his questions and provided everything that he needed. "A lot of retailers shy away from wildbird feed, because they think it's a specialized product," Cole said. "Your distributor should be able to help point you in the right direction."

Many distributors handle backyard birding products that fit the needs of setting up an backyard birding category, Wulf said. "Some even have preset planograms of their best selling items with everything a retailer needs and even in-house birding experts that can help retailers get started," he said.

Mel Toellner, president of Gold Crest Distributing, said he helps pond and water garden retailers choose what works best for their stores by asking them to fill out questionnaires identifying their customers and competition. Toellner said he has a trademarked concept called "specific bird selling" that groups functional products with pictures of the backyard bird.

"When the customer walks up to a display looking for something to attract Northern Cardinals, the products will have a cardinal on it," Toellner said. "These are called zones, and we have several of them. For example, two winter zones include clingers (woodpeckers, nuthatches, chickadees and titmice) and cardinals. We do other zones with squirrel-proof feeders and water, which includes birdbaths and heaters."

Rick Savino, a wildbird specialist for Birdola Products in Grand Rapids, Mich., said educating customers is a great way to pick up backyard birding sales. He offered these suggestions: Remind pond and water garden customers that the longer, colder nights in northern climates require most of a backyard bird's stored energy to survive before finding more food in the morning. Water gardeners can help by providing shelter, such as roostboxes. Backyard birds need fresh water, so pond and water garden retailers can include heated birdbaths and birdbath heaters in their winter displays. If the backyard birds must eat snow, it takes much of their stored energy to warm the snow so their bodies can use the water. Providing water for them allows backyard birds to expend less stored energy. These backyard birds also need fresh water to preen their feathers and keep them in good flying condition.

Whether talking about the winter months or the entire year, premium backyard birding products continue to grow in popularity, Wulf said. "Shoppers are becoming more educated on what wild birds desire and what blends to feed them," he said.

Backyard birding product manufacturers continue to develop premium products out of backyard birding industry innovation and due to customer demand for unavailable products, Wulf said. For backyard birding customers who want to fill birdfeeders for minimal out-of-pocket expense, economy birdfeed blends always will sell in large volume, Wulf said. As backyard birding customers educate themselves about how to attract desired species, however, Wulf said premium backyard birding products that leave out birdfeed filler ingredients find a growing customer following.

For beginning backyard birders, David J. Horn, Ph.D., director of the National Bird-Feeding Society and associate professor of biology at Millikin University in Decatur, Ill., said tubular birdfeeders with black-oil sunflower attracts most backyard birds. "As people become more interested in birdfeeding, there are other options such as a suet feeder to attract woodpeckers and nuthatches," Horn said.

"Another option would be types of feeders that hold nyjer, which is very attractive to Pine Siskins and goldfinches," Horn said. "Peanut feeders are attractive to Blue Jays, nuthatches and woodpeckers. A hopper feeder or platform feeder is best for the bigger birds, such as doves."

Savino said backyard birders generally use suet more in the winter, because backyard birds need to store fat to make it through cold winter nights. "In the northern areas of the country, birds have to eat all day to have enough energy to generate the heat for survival through the 14 hours of darkness and cold," he said.

Selling backyard birding products can bring in extra cash when pond and water garden retailers experience less business while also creating another facet to the business. "If we remove the wildbird area from our store, we take away an opportunity to bond with that customer," Cole said. "The person who buys our stones, aquatics and plants is the same person buying bird feed."