This is an introduction to catering for birds in your garden. If you would like more detailed information, please contact the Sussex Wildlife Trust.

Why feed and house birds?
Feeding birds will give you the satisfaction of knowing that you are helping populations of birds survive at a time when the numbers of many bird species are in decline. It is also a sheer pleasure to see different birds gathering at a feeding site.

In winter, food is hard to find, and supplementing birds’ feeding can be indispensable to survival. In the spring, adults are busy trying to raise chicks. Not only do they need to hunt all day to find the right food for their chicks, they also need to feed themselves. A well-fed parent is better able to gather food for its chicks. Feeding birds in spring is likely to boost the number of chicks successfully raised to adulthood. For seed eaters, there is the added factor that many seeds from flowers are not available until later in the season.

But remember, if you decide to feed birds, do so regularly. If you stop feeding in the summer, tail off gradually, to give birds time to adjust.

Bird tables and bird feeders
There are many ways to feed birds, outlined below. With all these options, care should be taken to position the food source away from pouncing cats.

- **Bird tables.** These can be freestanding or hung from a tree. Put out seeds, chopped apples, cereal, bacon rind, biscuit crumbs, raisins, cooked potato or hardened fat.

- **Fat bars.** There are three kinds: seed bars, peanut bars and insect bars. The fat and insect bar has a small proportion of insects in it, and is suitable for insect eaters which used to migrate south in winter, but which may now overwinter in the UK.

- **Feeders.** These come in a variety of styles and colours. Different colours have been shown to attract different species of birds.
  - **Mesh feeders** are used for dispensing peanuts. This is the safest way for birds to eat peanuts, and is essential during the breeding season. Fledgling birds will choke on whole peanuts. A mesh feeder ensures that birds will only get a small piece of peanut at one time. These come in a variety of shapes and sizes – housed in wood, metal, or plastic. Mesh feeders with red at either end will attract woodpeckers and siskins (though these are rare feeders).
- **Seed tubes** with a green top and bottom, and filled with black sunflower seeds will attract goldfinches and greenfinches.
- **Clear seed tubes** with mixed sunflower seeds will attract greenfinches and sparrows. Sparrows are selective and quite likely to prefer black seeds to striped seeds – for the good reason that in black sunflower seeds, the kernel forms a much higher proportion of the weight.

- If you want to supplement the diet of insect feeders (such as robins and wrens), you can do so by giving them mealworms, which can now be obtained by post. You can also try giving them small strips of cheese. Do not give them angler’s maggots, as these may contain salmonella.

**Borders for birds**

Birds will be attracted to many garden plants for their seeds, berries, and shelter. Plants will also be hosts to many insects. You don’t need to plant a specific area for birds unless you want to watch them in one place.

- **Berries.** Birds are most attracted to red berries. These may provide valuable food during the winter – if they stay on the tree long enough! Trees and shrubs with berries on include: *Amelanchier lamarckii, Arbutus unedo,* Berberis, *Cornus mas,* Cotoneaster, *Daphne mezereum,* *Eleagnus, Hippophae, Hollies, Mahonia, Malus, Pyracantha, Sambucus* (do not prune hard), Skimmia, *Sorbus* and *Viburnum.*

- **Seeds.** These will also be source of food throughout the winter. Needless to say, the seed heads must be left to ripen. Good seed plants include: artichokes, marigolds, poppies, sunflowers, teasels and thistles.

**Don’t forget water**

Vital not just for drinking, but also for keeping feathers insulated – especially important in cold weather. Provide a shallow birdbath, or a shallow area in your pond.

**Nest boxes and nesting places**

It is more difficult to get birds to breed than to feed in your garden. This is partly because the chosen nesting site needs to be in a territory which will provide most of the food that both the adults and young need during this busy phase. A combination of the approaches above is likely to enhance the chances that birds will choose to breed in your garden.

Birds are also quite specific in their nest (and therefore bird box) requirements. If you are thinking of putting up a bird box, position is crucial. Bird boxes must be in the shade and sheltered from wet south-westerly winds. It is also best if they can be at least two metres above the ground, to lessen the danger of predation. They should be well hidden, but accessible to the birds.

Different types of bird box will be used by different species of birds. The basic design is a box with a sloping roof and a small round entrance hole. The hole needs to be different diameters for different species: blue tit, 27mm; tree sparrow, 28mm; house sparrow, 29mm; great tit, 30mm and nuthatches, 32mm. The basic design can be adapted for robins, wrens and flycatchers by cutting away part of the front panel.