



Ask P. Allen Smith

For the Birds?

Q I have customers coming in asking how to make their backyard a better place for birds, but I'm not sure where to start. Any suggestions?

There's a good chance that many of your customers who buy plants and supplies at your garden center also enjoy a hobby that could generate year-round income for your business. Though hunting and fishing are declining in popularity, bird watching and bird feeding have taken flight in recent years: According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, it is now a hobby of some 47.8 million Americans, with "wildlife watching" up 8 percent from 2000 to 2006.

Garden centers that are capitalizing on this trend carry a range of supplies such as bird food,

feeders, bird houses and bird baths. But there are some ways to enhance these offerings beyond simply stocking your shelves: The key to attracting bird enthusiasts is to have a well-organized section of your store devoted to their needs and to have a marketing plan to encourage customers to stop by and see what you have.

Food for Thought

If you aren't familiar with the hobby, you may be well served to contact a local birding group and ask for advice from some of the long-term members on what supplies and products they would purchase on a regular basis. Serious birders who

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PERSPECTIVE



Looking for some product ideas to build up your birding department? Turn to page 18 for *Lawn & Garden Retailer's* product focus.

feed their birds year round are often looking for basic supplies such as seeds and suet cakes in bulk quantities. As you learn more about the hobby, you'll quickly discover that certain types of seed attract different kinds of birds. So, for example, birders who want to draw finches will purchase thistle seeds, and those who want to attract cardinals, chickadees or nuthatches — to name a few — would pick up large sacks of black-oiled sunflower seeds.

There are also many types of feeders, including basic designs and those designed for certain kinds of feeds. For instance, thistle seed is very small, so there are special feeders that hold the seed so birds can remove them just a few at a time. Marauding squirrels who can empty bird feeders in a short time are a problem in many areas, so customers are often looking for a way to keep them from hogging all the food. Suet baskets and holders are also in demand for those who want to attract woodpeckers and other suet-feeding birds. And then there are the hummingbird enthusiasts who enjoy having multiple nectar feeders around.

A Place to Roost

A line of bird houses could also be part of your inventory. Depending on your customers' needs and tastes, different houses run the gamut from basic to highly decorative and whimsical. Here again, there are houses designed for different kinds of birds. Bird baths are another sought-after item for both the casual and serious birder. There are baths with heaters so the water won't freeze in the winter and those with pumps to keep the water circulating and fresh. And many are just looking for a bird bath that adds a decorative touch.

Start Small

If you aren't ready to get into a full line of bird supplies, here's a good way to work with what you already have: Go through your plant material and identify annuals, perennials, shrubs and trees that supply birds with food and habitat. Hummingbirds, for example are especially drawn to red and orange tubular and funnel-shaped flowers, but there is a wide range of plants that can be



One great spot to place a feeder that will attract hummingbirds and butterflies is near the kitchen or family room window (or next to a porch or outdoor setting) where homeowners can sit and watch the birds.

PERSPECTIVE



By making your garden center a spot for fellow birders to gather and pick up supplies, you'll be adding another component to your store to keep traffic "flocking" in all year long.

P. Allen Smith (www.pallensmith.com) is a professional garden designer, host of two national TV programs, a regular guest on NBC's Today Show and author of P. Allen Smith's Living in the Garden Home (Clarkson Potter, 2007) and other books in the Garden Home series.

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used. Label these plants "humming-bird magnets." There are also many fruit and seed producing plants that could be tagged or grouped to help customers easily identify varieties they could plant to attract birds to their yards.

Becoming a Destination

Once you outfit your store with the birding supplies you need and identify the "bird-friendly" plants in your nursery, develop a marketing plan to encourage people to stop by. Make your garden center the gathering place for enthusiastic birders. Offer coffee, hiking maps and other information. Perhaps the local Audubon Society (www.audubon.org) or a neighborhood environmental group would like to conduct a weekend workshop at your center. You could offer specials on certain bird-related items during those workshops.

Some states such as Maryland are offering downloadable coupons to purchase native trees and shrubs from participating garden centers. Check to see whether your state is providing similar programs.

Make sure your staff is well versed in these products. Customers often have many questions, and the more advice and help you can provide them, the more likely they are to return. One thing you'll notice right away is that birders love to share their stories and experiences.



**Tom Courtright, Owner
Orchard Nursery & Florist,
Lafayette, CA**

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- Tom Courtright, Owner, Orchard Nursery & Florist, Lafayette, CA

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