HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

HOLIDAY FOR THE BIRDS

Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, home baked cookies and hot chocolate are a few of the treats we enjoy this season. While you are decorating inside and out to show your holiday spirit, add a few treats for the birds.

Decorating outside keeps little hands busy and these simple activities will be remembered for years to come. While kids and grandchildren are home for the holidays, play together and create some new holiday traditions.

I think I was about 5 years old when I learned that some birds like peanut butter. It was a long time ago and I don't recall all the details of how I learned it, but I remember my sister and I smearing it on the trunk of a grapefruit tree outside so we could see the birds eat it. Was Mom surprised when she discovered we had used the whole jar!

Lessons learned? First, keep your eyes on children at all times. Second, wildlife watching is a fun hobby that can be learned at a young age.

I've gotten much older and still like playing with peanut butter. Now, I have fun making pine cone bird feeders to hang in the trees.

Make a hanger by tying a piece of yarn or string around the pine cone. Wrap it tightly around the open scales, either at the base or at the tip end. Spoon about a ¼ cup (not the whole jar) of peanut butter per pine cone onto a paper plate. Use a plastic knife to smear the peanut butter onto the open scales. Pour wild bird seed or chicken scratch feed into a paper bowl or on a paper plate and roll the sticky pine cone to coat the peanut butter with the seeds. Keep plenty of paper towels ready. I am not sure if it is fun because it is messy or messy because it is fun.

Outdoor decorations for wildlife can be colorful, practical as well as easy to make. Slice oranges, apples and grapefruits and hang them with colored yarn for pretty decorations the birds and squirrels will love to eat.

Lights are beautiful tree decorations at night, but strands of fresh cranberries, raisins and popcorn are colorful during the day. Use red or green crochet string and a big eyed darning or embroidery needle with a blunt point for young children. Little ones have a tough time stringing the popped corn that crumbles, but they enjoy eating it while you string it. Whole cranberries are easier for them to string like beads. Make strands of a single snack item or mix them on the string.

Hang homemade fruit feeders for natural outdoor ornaments. Cut an orange or grapefruit in half and scoop the juicy flesh out of the peel with a spoon. You eat the inside and save the peel for the critters. Punch three holes near the edge. Insert colored yard and knot it to make a basket type handle. Fill with bird seed and hang in the trees.

Butterflies, moths and birds like fresh fruit so cut some oranges, pineapple and over ripe banana for a fruit salad they will enjoy. Put them on a horizontal branch or make a platform feeder by sinking a post in the ground and nailing a board to the top. When I was in Costa Rica, the hotels and lodges had feeding stations next to the outside dining areas. We all enjoyed seeing the birds up close and it made for some great photo opportunities.

Squirrels are quite acrobatic and can walk a tight wire or rope with ease. Make a squirrel gym for hours of entertainment for you and for them. My dad used a can opener to cut the top out of a half gallon juice can or a large coffee can. He then cut two holes at the top edge of the can on opposite sides and poked a few small holes in the bottom with an ice pick so water could drain out when it rained. He strung clothes line between two trees and then used string to hang several cans along the line. Then we put about a cup of chicken scratch feed into each can.

We loved watching the squirrels sit in the large cans to eat. They would hang off the line with their back feet to reach into the cans. Sometimes, there was a squirrel eating at each can.

I think Dad had some Dennis the Menace in him. He had fun sneaking up on the squirrels when they had their heads in the cans and tapping the side with a long skinny cane fishing pole. Wow, could they move fast, but the
squirrels always came back for more.

Buy some binoculars and a Florida bird guide and you and the kids are in for years of enjoyment.

Birders across the world will be flocking together to count birds at feeders and in the wild during the annual Christmas Bird Count. CBC is important since the official counts are used by scientists to spot changes in winter migration patterns and population changes. Volunteers are needed, whether new to bird watching or seasoned experts, to help with the local count on January 2.

Groups go to various locations during the day, then gather at night for dinner to share stories and report on their special sightings. Call Debbie Wemmette with the Kissimmee Valley Audubon Society at 407-846-4932 for more information.

You don't have to be an Audubon member to participate. But there is a $5 fee that will be used to help keep the counts running, and local chapters prefer that you sign up in advance so they can coordinate the counters. To find a Christmas Bird Count, go to the Audubon of Florida's Web site at audubonofflorida.org or call 407-539-5700.

Best wishes for a safe and happy Holiday Season!

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