

Encouraging Chickadees in the Garden and Orchard

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Few organic gardeners and farmers would doubt the enormous value of birds in regulating insect pest populations. Many birds, including the chickadees, consume insects all year-round. Other birds such as song sparrows-which specialize in the seed eating way of life-consume enormous quantities of insects during the nesting season. I have often thought, for example, that the main factor standing between a successful cabbage crop and one ruined by the green cabbage caterpillar is the tremendous appetite of nesting birds.

Birds, however, do need encouragement if they are to do their best at gathering pests. They need a steady food supply, sheltered locations for nesting, and a source of water. Some of the best insect eaters are cavity nesters who need nesting boxes to replace the snags our 'tidy' landscaping habits have removed.

Bird baths too are a vital part of any garden, attracting active birds from a considerable distance. By providing a source of food during the winter months, we can cut down on the mortality rate of overwintering bird populations. Chickadees, for example, probably die more from chill on winter nights when energy producing food is scarce and cold, wet weather is abundant than any other cause. A little extra food, regularly supplied, can go a long way toward keeping birds warm and alive.

One of the best ideas I have heard on encouraging birds for pest control motives was suggested by Lawrence Hills of the Henry Doubleday Research Assn. CHDRA). Mr. Hills is one of Britain's foremost horti- culturalists and gardening experts, but more important is his life long contribution to the developing organic agriculture movement, which has been tremendous.

The organization which he founded and heads, HDRA, is one of the largest and most productive membership organizations dedicated to biological husbandry in the world. HDRA is founded on the need for accurate and relevant research to solve problems with food production systems and many of its 7000 plus members conduct garden experiments each year. Mr. Hills suggests that our American Chickadees are really nearly the same as the British Tits which the organic gardeners in Europe encourage with a winter ration of suet. These insect eating Chickadees (or Tits) can get very little of value from the seed food supplied in so many bird feeders but require high energy animal food-suet-and will come a long way to get it.

Chickadees travel in flocks during the winter and occupy themselves with searching for insects. Their normal habitat is forest and forest edge conditions and their ecological niche is searching the fine cracks in bark and around bud scales of bushes and trees. If a flock of Chickadees can be attracted into an orchard or garden by following Lawrence Hill's suggestion of providing suet, they could drastically cut down on overwintering populations of insects which hide in the cracks in the bark of trees and bushes. He suggests hanging suet balls up in, over, or near bushes and trees which are effected by aphids. When a flock of Chickadees comes to the suet they will search the tree for overwintering aphids as well as other insects while waiting their turn at the suet. This could substantially reduce the overwintering aphid population which becomes the foundation stock for the next season's population. This one factor might delay the Spring build

up of Rosy Apple Aphids, Black Cherry Aphids, etc. and give predators and parasites a better chance to keep the population under control.

Sadly, by the time you read this, it will be just about too late to experiment with suet. Chickadees, and aphids this winter. February and March can be hard months, however, and it may still be a life saving measure to provide some suet now. Suet balls can be easily made by melting down some tallow-perhaps mixing in some seeds and peanuts-and forming into a ball around a wire coat hanger bent up into a tangle so that the hook end protrudes about 8 in. above the ball. These can be hung by their hooks in trees and bushes. If you have a tree which is frequently infested with aphids, it would be good to try this and notice any changes in next year's aphid population.

A Sweet Cherry tree may carry an overwintering population of Black Cherry Aphids tucked snugly into cracks at the buds. Euonymus trees are the favored overwintering sites of the dread Black Bean Aphid (*Aphid fabae*). Apples often carry a population of soft bodied scale insects, a favorite food for Chickadees. These and many other potential pests are an easy mark for these Chickadees which are so adept at searching the bark and bud scales during winter.

Now is also a good time to put up nesting boxes for Chickadees. The forest edge type habitat that our town gardens, diverse farmsteads, and orchards approximate is good Chickadee country, but suitable nesting sites are often missing. Small nesting boxes with entrance holes small enough to discourage Starlings should be mounted on posts, walls, and tree trunks in sheltered locations. The idea is to replace the cavities that Woodpeckers carve out of old, dead snags. Boxes which don't attract Chickadees may serve as home for nesting Wrens or Swallows.

It would be nice if enough of us took the time to observe the comings and goings of Chickadee flocks during the next few years to evaluate the effective-ness of strategically hanging suet, posting nesting boxes, and maintaining bird baths. We should let Lawrence Hills know how his idea, which works so well in England, works out for us in North America. Also, by comparing observations through Tilth, we'll be able to help ourselves develop a better understanding of birds, insects, and the ecological complexities of our farms and gardens.