

Bell County Master Gardeners
Tip of the Week
By Candace Mullen
“Christmas for the Critters”

During this joyous season let us not forget the birds, animals, and insects that give us much pleasure during the seasons while we observe and enjoy them! While it is not a good idea, generally, to feed wild animals in our yards, during this time of the year, particularly if the weather is cold and the wind chill falls, it won't hurt to provide the right kind of food for a few days. Actually, if wild animals get into the habit of feeding from our handouts it can cause many problems. In the case of deer and smaller animals, they become dependent and won't forage for themselves if easy food is available; human food is usually not beneficial to the animals; wild animals lose their fear of humans and become a real nuisance; or diseases can be transmitted to pets and humans. It is better to provide shelter and water year-round and a varied habitat for the urbanized critters so they can take care of themselves.

A good way to watch the birds is to provide seeds, of course, but at this time you should also provide some suet for them to eat. A birdbath that has clean water and is not frozen is especially welcome in the winter. Provide various sizes of birdhouses for the birds staying the winter; bat houses are also good for your resident mosquito eaters while they “hang around!” Butterflies also like shelter in special butterfly houses tucked away in a tree.

Adding a windbreak or brush piles will give some shelter to the little guys like rabbits or chipmunks so they too will have a safe place to spend the winter months. You can also recycle the old Christmas tree with pinecones filled with peanut butter or suet hung on the branches with perhaps a popcorn string or two, and strung cranberries to provide some color and more food. Add it to the brush pile or chip it up when it is stripped by the critters!

A gardener is always cutting back and deadheading the plants in their garden. Consider leaving some of the plants like coneflowers, sunflowers, and others for the birds to eat the seeds in the winter. There is a stark beauty in dead stalks standing in a garden or field with a beautiful bird perched on it hungrily feeding. Next year consider planting

native plants that bear berries, nuts, or fruits in the fall and leave them for the critters to enjoy.

When little is blooming in our gardens, we enjoy planning for the future seasons. Stop and enjoy the wildlife in your area by thinking of them this Christmas season and get your camera out when your visitors arrive. It is a wonderful way to teach children the wonders of nature and the value of all God's creatures. Happy Holidays to All!

Have any questions? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com