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## Bird Feeders, Part 1

Feeding birds during the winter is a fun and often educational way to wile away some of the cold weather from a comfortable indoor location. It provides an opportunity to view many species of birds up close and to observe their behavior and flight characteristics. A small pair of binoculars enhances the viewing even more and allows for detailed observations of small but important identification clues such as wing bars, marks on the head or tail feathers, etc. A good bird identification book is also a nice holiday gift! I think I have three bird identification books now but I hesitate to recommend any one over another since this is a rather contentious issue among many birders!

Bird feeding is also a huge agricultural business in terms of bird seed production. I was very surprised to learn that one single store in Greene County (not a department or chain store) annually sells more than 30 tons of just one particular type of bird seed mixture! This is in addition to many, many more tons of such staples as black oil sunflower seeds and the other popular birdseeds. I read somewhere a few years ago that Americans spend six to eight billion dollars a year on bird seed.

I wonder how much of that seed is consumed by squirrels. Every year we get calls from people who are plagued by squirrels eating all the birdseed they put out. Years ago I purchased a "squirrel proof" bird feeder that cost close to \$40 but it has saved that much money in bird seed in one year. Several readers have written to me asking for the details of my feeder i.e. brand name, where purchased, etc. but I have since learned that "squirrel proof" is a relative term. My particular type of squirrel proof feeder was quickly figured out by squirrels at a friend's house. Apparently her squirrels are smarter or more determined than mine.

I am getting ready to purchase a new bird feeder since my old one has finally broken and I will report on my results. I had tried adding hot sauce to the bird seed and crushed red pepper but my squirrels seem to enjoy the spices. I thought about putting the feeder on a tall pole with a baffle around it to prevent them from climbing up but I like seeing the bird's right outside my window. Squirrels can easily leap six feet straight up and probably longer distances from off the roof or from any other structure. My squirrels did get some seed that spilled out of the feeder but the birds got most of it. In addition to being relatively squirrel proof, another consideration when buying a bird feeder is how easy it is to clean. Bird feeders do accumulate bird droppings and some seeds do rot in the bottom of the feeder so being able to disassemble and clean the feeder is another thing to look for. Bird feeders may help to transmit certain disease which is one reason why some environmentalists discourage the practice. Next week I will continue with this timely topic.

Bob Beyfuss, Extension Educator  
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November 26, 2007

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## Firewood Class Scheduled

The price of crude oil has hit an all time high as I write this column and many homeowners are looking at home heating fuel costs to increase by perhaps 25% from last year. If you are considering the purchase of a wood burning stove you might want to attend this upcoming workshop.

On Saturday, November 10, from 10:00 am until 12:00 noon we will be offering a class on home heating with wood and chainsaw safety at the Agroforestry Resource Center here in Acra. The class will cover some of the pros and cons of heating with wood, cost comparisons of various types of fuels such as oil and propane, the burning characteristics of many common types of firewood and an overview of chainsaw safety. The cost of the class is \$10 per person, which includes handouts and you must pre-register by November 8, by calling us at (518) 622-9820. If I can convince my friend Wayne to come and talk about various types of wood stoves, that will be an added bonus!

Last week I wrote about deer ticks and Lyme disease but this week we are getting many calls about ladybugs. Ladybugs, or lady beetles as they are also called, have become a pretty common

nuisance insect during the past 10 years or more. Although the lady beetle is New York State's official insect, and they are considered highly beneficial since they prey on insect pests, the truth is that they have become an indoor nuisance pest themselves. Each fall lady beetles emit what is known as an "aggregation pheromone" which is a chemical scent that attracts other lady beetles and causes them to congregate in large numbers in anticipation of their winter hibernation. They are strongly attracted to warm sunny surfaces such as western or southern facing exposures on houses or other outbuildings. About one week ago on a warm and sunny day almost the entire south facing side of my house was covered with lady beetles and many of them found their way indoors.

Indoors they can become quite a nuisance since they sometimes bite when they land on you and if you squash them, they leave an ugly yellow stain. This particular species of lady beetle (multi-spotted Asian lady beetle) was purposely imported by the USDA many years ago to feed on nuisance insects that affect some agricultural crops. I am not sure if it is even legal to spray them outdoors with an over the counter insect killer as they congregate on buildings since they are considered beneficial but indoors we suggest using a small hand held vacuum cleaner to suck them up for release outside.

The other insect pests we are getting many calls on are fruit flies. These small, somewhat slow moving gnat-like insects may be found anytime and anywhere fruit or vegetables begin to rot. They can also survive and perhaps even breed in small amounts of wine or fruit juice in a cup or saucer and many times they end up in kitchen drains feeding on the organic matter in the pipes. Use a drain cleaner for that problem. I have heard that they can even survive on a moist sponge in the kitchen. Careful searching usually finds their source and they will disappear shortly after it is removed. They are also attracted to vinegar and one home remedy for them is to put some vinegar in a bowl with plastic on top. Punch tiny holes in the plastic and the fruit flies will get in to the bowl but usually drown in the vinegar before they can get out.

Bob Beyfuss, Extension Educator  
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November 5, 2007

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## Deer Ticks Active Again

The unseasonably warm weather most of this month, without a hard frost in most places, has allowed many types of insects or their relatives (ticks are not insects technically) to continue their activity. At this time of the year adult female deer ticks are looking for a blood meal in order to survive the winter. They feed on many species of mammals and even birds but unfortunately, they may transmit Lyme disease to humans as they feed.

Seasonal fall outdoor activities such as raking leaves, hiking on trails, cutting firewood, gardening, napping in the woods while supposedly turkey hunting and any other outdoor activity puts you at risk for getting bit by a deer tick. I have actually given up pheasant hunting in the tall grasses and flats near Athens in Greene County because of the fact that I know I will pick up deer ticks in that habitat. Duck hunters in the marshes along the Hudson River are especially at risk since that environment seems to harbor very large populations of deer ticks. I have had Lyme disease twice and it is not something I want to go through again.

Fortunately, there are ways you can significantly reduce the risk of contracting Lyme disease. First, be aware that the entire Hudson Valley and Capital District region have the most reported cases of Lyme disease in the entire nation. Anytime you are outdoors working or playing you need to be frequently checking your clothing for deer ticks. Ticks do not jump or fly; they cling to vegetation that you may brush up against and they will grasp your clothing. Generally they will crawl over your body for quite some time before they actually bite. They may bite you almost anywhere on your body but many of the people we talk to report being bitten under the beltline or some other constricted area or behind the knees. The tick bite may not even be noticed since their mouthparts are uniquely designed to allow attachment without really hurting the host. Once attached an adult female deer tick must feed for at least

24 hours or more to infect you. If you discover and remove the tick soon after it bites you, the odds of you getting infected are slim.

You can also apply insect repellents containing DEET to your skin or you can apply repellents containing permethrin to your clothing. These are totally different chemicals and you need to read and follow the label directions carefully for each of these types of repellents. The best prevention however is to perform a thorough body check when you return home. Parents need to check their kids and caregivers of older folks need to be diligent also. For more information on Lyme disease contact your local health department (Greene County (518) 719-3600) or our office of Cornell Cooperative Extension Greene County at (518) 622-9820.

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October 29, 2007

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## Local Food

The fall harvest season is perhaps the easiest time to actually eat local food almost exclusively. Of course, as long as I enjoy such exotic items as coffee, tea or orange juice, my diet will never be completely local. Our farmers and gardeners have harvested a bounty of tasty and healthy fruits and vegetables. In late summer to early fall I practically live on meals made from sweet corn, tomatoes, zucchini, salads and now local fruit such as peaches and apples are available. Since my garden is so late in producing most vegetables I have not yet begun to tire of BLT sandwiches, tomato sandwiches, zucchini everything, cucumbers and other items some gardeners would like to see go away.

Not too many years ago our local food supply was pretty much limited to vegetables and fruit but that is no longer the case. There are now a number of farmers who produce and sell locally raised beef, chicken, pork and all the various products made from those animals. If you would like to purchase local food, both animal and vegetable, as well as hay, maple products, grain, fence posts, fruit, eggs, flowers, etc., give us a call at (518) 622-9820 and ask for the guide to Our Farms. It lists dozens of producers with directions to their farm or locations where the food may be purchased.

There are many, many reasons why it is good to buy local food. Recent warnings about E. coli contamination of bagged salad greens have made some people suspicious of the safety of food that must be trucked in from thousands of miles away. Buying salad greens at the farmer's market insures freshness and quality control that the FDA cannot necessarily guarantee. Trucked in food may appear on the surface to be less expensive than local but the costs do not reflect the environmental costs of trucking it thousands of miles or the indirect costs of pesticides on the health of the farm workers who handle it or the resulting pollution of rivers and streams from factory farms that crank out millions of pounds of chicken, beef or pork. All taxpayers share these costs from highway maintenance and repairs to air pollution and health care. The energy costs of shipping food are enormous compared to buying it local and these costs certainly affect the prices we consumers pay.

Farms actually lower taxes for the rest of us also. Agriculture typically produces \$1.00 in tax revenues for 15 to 40 cents of town and school expenditures, whereas residential development costs \$1.09 to \$1.56 for each \$1.00 of taxes gathered. Preservation of open space by farms increases tourism revenues also.

On Saturday, October 20, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Greene County and our Agroforestry Resource Center will be hosting "A 50-Mile Dinner" to celebrate local farms and their bounty. The menu will consist of food from within a 50 mile radius of our office in Acra featuring Jamaican Style Hubbard squash and Cabbage soup, Wild Hive Grana with Red Russian Kale and Garlic, Grilled Winter squash and Pickled green tomato salad, Oaxacan Braised Beef with Roasted Local Chiles tortillas and Corn or wild mushroom stew for vegetarians (depending on whether or not I can gather enough local wild mushrooms by then!). Dessert will be Pear/Apple Tart Tatin with Frozen Goat Cheese.

The food will be prepared by famous chef, Ric Orlando of New World Home Cooking. The cost is \$60 per person or \$100 for two and I am pretty sure it will sell out soon. If you would like to attend, contact us at (518) 622-9820 for reservations.

Bob Beyfuss, Extension Educator  
Cornell Cooperative Extension of Greene County  
October 1, 2007

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## Fall Flowers

Fall is a great time to plant trees, shrubs, perennials, bulbs and even some vegetables such as garlic and spinach. Local garden centers have all sorts of great bargains right now on spring and summer flowering perennials and shrubs that they don't necessarily want to store over winter. Some of these plants may look pretty ratty right now but as long as the root systems look good, they should be fine. Most consumers never even think about looking at the roots of plants they purchase until they pop them out of the container to plant. At this time of the year look at the roots before your purchase!

The following plants bloom from mid-summer to late fall. Yarrow or *Achillea* are easy to grow perennials that feature clusters of small flowers in various shades of pink, white and red. *Aconitum* or monkshood is a blue flowered, shade loving, very delicate appearing perennial plant that demands cool, moist but well drained soil. It is not particularly easy to grow. There are several species of sedum that are easy to grow in full sun and bloom as late as October. Japanese anemones are also beautiful and delicate perennials that bloom well into September.

This brings us to the asters of which there are many species, both cultivated and wild. I have transplanted deep, violet to blue colored wild asters (pasture asters) from a horse pasture into a perennial border where they steal the show each August into September. You will find three or four different wild varieties of aster growing in the shady woods from August until mid-September. Right now you will also find a white flowered plant I call white snakeroot in bloom in the woods. Botanically this plant is *Eupatorium rugosum* and it is closely related to another late summer blooming Eupatorium called Joe-Pye weed. This and the late flowering boneset feature clusters of small pink to purple flowers. I have seen Joe-Pye weed grow to ten feet tall in Kentucky but it usually tops out at about five feet tall around here. A few other shade loving woodland wildflowers that have fall appeal are red and white baneberry with red or white pea sized berries with single black dots on each berry. This accounts for their common name of "doll's eyes." Jack in the Pulpit has an unusual and interesting flower in spring and bright, red berry clusters in the fall.

Chrysanthemums are very well known and popular perennials, that are never perennial for me! Fortunately, they are inexpensive and for a \$20 bill you can easily brighten up any flowerbed with a few different colored varieties. Both asters and mums require regular pinching back from May until July for the best floral display in September.

Virgin's bower (*Clematis virginiana*) is a vigorous growing vine with small white flowers that really puts on a display in August and September. Finally, we have fall blooming crocus which are bulbous type plants that may be enjoyed as you prepare the site for your spring flowering bulbs. These are just a few of the nice flowers we can enjoy even as summer is on the run.

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September 17, 2007

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## A Summer Excursion to Kentucky

I went to Kentucky last week to meet Wendell Berry. Many of you do not know of him but if you can access a computer, I suggest you look him up on Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wendell\\_Berry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wendell_Berry). He is a hero of mine, a writer, poet, social critic but more

than all of these a farmer and gardener. We went to purchase a ram from him, traveling from West Virginia in a pickup truck with a homemade ram cage in the bed of the pick up. Easterners, city dwellers and people from the south call pickups "trucks." Westerners reserve that term for flatbeds, tractor trailers, dump trucks and other more formidable vehicles. The drive was more than 10 hours round trip and I learned a whole lot about growing tobacco and sheep husbandry en route. My traveling companions, both native West Virginian farmers, sounded much like Larry the cable guy and Jeff Foxworthy but their politics were far more akin to Noam Chomsky than I would ever have guessed by their bib coveralls and tobacco filled cheeks. It was a wonderful learning experience for me.

Central Kentucky was bone dry and record breaking hot, 102 degrees to be precise. The fields were parched and brown, even the sycamore trees along the river were wilted and the pastured livestock stood very, very quietly under the trees following the shade as it moved from west to east. It is easy to notice things like this in flatlands on a long trip. The breeze felt more like a blast furnace than refreshing air. Small fields of burley tobacco had already turned bright yellow in anticipation of an early harvest. Every single tobacco plant receives more hands on care than any other crop I am aware of, or maybe one other cash crop comes to mind that gets more attention.

I am well aware that tobacco kills or injures millions of people each year but I found it hard to make the connection between these small patches of tall, yellow plants and the cigarettes or cigars they are turned into. Native Americans used tobacco more as part of cultural rituals than the social disease it has become today. I wondered if those plants were as addictive raw as the products they are turned into. Roger, our driver, grew about a half acre patch of tobacco which netted him about \$2,000 in a good growing season, he said.

Wendell's daughter and son-in-law operate a winery on what used to be a tobacco farm. They told me it is much harder to grow wine grapes than tobacco in Kentucky as they tested bird repelling, noise cannons on the robins that would surely consume their entire crop. The noise makers failed as it seems that even animals have become as immune to disturbing noise as people who cannot hear themselves talking on cell phones in crowded places.

As we left Kentucky it began to rain hard and the rain followed us back all the way to West Virginia. The ram did not mind the cool rain at all in the back of the pickup. All sheep and rams seem to have a perpetual grin on their faces and this one was no exception. My traveling companions thanked me as though I had brought the rain with me from cool, green, upstate New York. All I could think of was this fragment of a poem by Wendell Berry that I read once and quickly memorized. I will end with this and dedicate it to my co-worker Mick who understands these things much better than me. "We hear from way off approaching sounds. Of rain on leaves and on the River, Oh blessed rain, bring up the grass to the tongues of the hungry cattle."

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Cornell Cooperative Extension of Greene County  
August 27, 2007

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## Harvest Season

This is the time of year when we begin to wonder just what to do with all the surplus vegetables we suddenly seem to have. When the neighbors pull down the shades and pretend to be out when you approach with yet another basket of zucchini or you have exhausted all 1,167 recipes from your zucchini cookbook or your pole beans are still producing a bushel of beans each day or you suddenly realize that no family can consume all the fruit from your 29 tomato plants, then it is time to think about putting some of this very good stuff away for the winter.

On Friday, September 14, from 3:30 to 5:00 PM we will be offering a Freezing Fruits and Vegetables at Home workshop at the Agroforestry Resource Center, 6055 Route 23, Acra, New York. The cost of this workshop is \$10 per person and you need to pre-register by calling us at (518) 622-9820. Take advantage of the season's bounty whether it is from your own garden or from local roadside farm stands or a Farmer's Market by learning about freezing fruits and vegetables. Fresh frozen fruits and

vegetables are nutritionally as good as or even better than fresh produce from a market, purchased out of our growing season. The fresh produce sold in winter is often not as nutritious as frozen because it has been held for days to weeks and shipped in from across the country or even across the world. Buying your produce locally also supports our regional agricultural industry and we need these farmers more than most people ever really understand why.

In addition to vegetables, many people like to preserve flowers that have performed exceptionally well in the local garden. Well if you are interested in saving seeds from either flowers or vegetables, you will want to attend our How to Save Seeds class, which will be presented on Wednesday, August 22, at the Agroforestry Resource Center, from 6:00 to 7:30 PM. The fee is also \$10 per person and please call first to register. I save seeds each year from a couple of interesting plants including a tomato that I call "Son of Big Beef" as well as spinach, lettuce, and my "Scarlet Runner" pole beans. Check out all our upcoming classes and fact sheets at <<http://agroforestrycenter.org/>><http://agroforestrycenter.org> .

Several gardeners have called in reporting that their first ripe tomatoes develop black spots on the bottom of the fruit that enlarge and eventually rot. This is called blossom end rot and it is a physiological disorder that will cure itself in pretty short order (trust me!). It also occurs to a much lesser extent on some varieties of bell peppers.

We are still getting lots of calls on the giant, yellow jacket like, creatures called "cicada killer wasps." These insect nest in sandy soil and as ferocious as they may appear or act, they are generally pretty harmless.

Black and white colored, so called "bald faced" hornets which make large, gray colored, papier-mâché like nests are not harmless if their nests are located anywhere near an area where people walk. Buy some aerosol wasp and hornet killer and spray half the can directly into the entrance hole of the nest but do so only after dark on a cool evening.

Bob Beyfuss, Extension Educator  
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August 20, 2007

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## August Gardening Tips

Well, the dog days of summer are upon us once again as we spend more time inside near the air conditioner and less time outside in the garden. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Be careful working outside when it is very hot and muggy. Even our pristine mountain air is not as healthy as it once was and heat stroke is a serious issue. For the most part, our gardens are planted and mulched. Weeding is not so crucial once plants have become established and lawn growth has slowed or even ceased in dryer regions. Some vegetable garden plants that have already produced good crops of zucchini, cucumber and summer squash have petered out due to insects or diseases just as we really don't want or need anymore of these fruits! I generally quit weeding the vegetable garden by mid-August mainly because I am tired of it! Technically, I should be killing the weeds before they go to seed but sometimes I think there are already so many weed seeds in the soil bank that it is pointless.

Local sweet corn and tomatoes have arrived in the markets just as our own come into full production. Homegrown corn and tomatoes really do taste better if only for the self satisfaction that comes from doing it yourself. Right now I am waiting for the local raccoons to alert me as to when my corn will be ready. Despite my 40+ years of gardening experience, they know better than I when it is time for a nocturnal raid. They can easily climb any fence but a single strand of electric fence wire only three inches above the ground will keep them away. One of nature's jokes prohibits these agile creatures from jumping at all.

Many people are going away on vacation this month and the question of how to care for our gardens and house plants while we are gone comes up. For vegetable gardens the best advice I can offer is to water thoroughly before leaving and apply a four to six inch layer of straw or hay mulch. This will conserve moisture and suppress the weeds while keeping soil temperatures cooler than bare soil. If possible, ask a neighbor to harvest anything that is ripe since failure to harvest crops, such as beans,

causes them to stop producing in short order. You will also avoid the zucchini as big as baseball bats syndrome if someone keeps them picked. By now leafy crops like lettuce and spinach have bolted and it is time to sow seed for a fall crop of these. The straw mulch will keep the soil cool and dark enough for the seeds to sprout and the mulch can be pulled back in September to allow them to grow. Houseplants can be placed in the bathtub for a good shower and left there for up to two weeks with little supplemental light needed. If possible, place the pots on pans or ledges and leave a couple of inches of water in the bottom of the tub for humidity. Don't let the pots sit in the water or they may get root rot. Flower gardens should also be well watered and mulched before you leave. When you return, cooler weather may have begun to trigger a new flush of growth.

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August 13, 2007

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## Interesting Insects

People often walk up to me at public events, such as the Greene County Youth Fair, with various types of containers clutched in their hands. If the container is small I can usually guess that it is some sort of insect they want to have identified. If the container is large or in a large paper bag, it is usually a plant that is either unknown or suffering from some sort of malady. I do not mind these encounters because I usually know what the specimen is especially if two other people already showed it to me this week.

Last week at least three people brought me samples of what appears to be the biggest yellow jacket anyone has ever seen. These are cicada killer wasps and they nest in sandy soils, often beneath sidewalks, decks or other protected places. As large and as frightening as these insect appear to be they are generally quite harmless. They will buzz around you and act very menacing, but rarely do they sting. They prey on cicadas of all types, capturing them and bringing them back to their underground nests, apparently to feed their young. The nests are usually located so deep below the soil surface that ground applied insecticides are not that effective. There are often no obvious entrance holes to pour insecticides into and even if an entrance hole is found it does not lead directly to a nest below. I do not recommend killing these insects. They are generally harmless and actually beneficial since they kill cicadas, which are not generally considered as beneficial.

Other yellow jackets and hornets are a different story. Some of these stinging insects have above ground, seasonal nests that may be under a deck or eaves or stairs near areas used often by humans. They may be very aggressive and their dispositions get meaner as the days get shorter and their numbers increase exponentially. Grey-colored papier-mâché like hornet nests should be destroyed, if they are located in a busy area, before they get too large in late August. They may be sprayed directly into the entrance hole with an over the counter aerosol, wasp and hornet killer only on a cool evening when all the insects are inside and sluggish and not during the daytime when they are out foraging. Yellow jackets also nest in the ground under lawns so before you mow the lawn again, take a few minutes observing to see if yellow jackets are flying to and from a small hole in the grassy area. If so, don't mow until you spray the wasp and hornet killer into the nest hole at night. DO NOT pour gasoline, kerosene or some other toxic chemical into the hole!

Other interesting insects I have seen lately include giant water beetles from someone's swimming pool. These beetles are large enough to capture and eat small frogs even! Dobson flies are also large flying insects attracted to outdoor lights near streams or other water bodies. These two- to three-inch long insects have huge, pincher like, jaws that look like they could bite your finger off. Caddis fly larvae construct portable "cases" made of sand or bits of wood glued together that they carry around with them to crawl into at night. They resemble little coffins that the insects use to take shelter in when threatened.

Finally, a client just came in with some dogwood sawfly larvae. These are snow white colored caterpillars that eat the leaves of shrubby dogwoods. Scientists speculate that their white coloring make them look like bird droppings which make them less noticeable to caterpillar eating birds.

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August 5, 2007