

## To kill a hummingbird

Your hummingbird feeder's liquid is cloudy and the weather's been warm for a few days but you figure you'll get around to cleaning the feeder the next time it's empty. What you don't know is that in the time you're waiting between cleanings you may be sickening and even killing the very birds you love to watch.

That solution of sugar and water, sitting in the hot sun, is a perfect breeding ground for potentially lethal mold and fungus.

If mold and fungus grow in the feeder, the fungus can infect the hummingbird's tongue and make it swell up causing the condition known as Hummers Candidiasis. Once swollen, the hummingbird can't eat, painfully starving it to death as it coats the tongue and covers the trachea, according to the Audubon Society of California.

More troubling is that a mother hummingbird can infect her babies after visiting a dirty hummingbird feeder. If you set up a hummingbird feeder, keeping it clean helps protect the birds that are trustingly visiting your home.

"A dirty feeder with contaminated nectar can be toxic to hummingbirds," said Melissa Mayntz, Wild Bird Expert. "Cloudy, milky nectar or nectar that shows visible dark specks is dangerous and should be promptly discarded. Feeders should be cleaned and sterilized regularly so they are safe for hummingbirds to use."

Hummingbird feeders should be cleaned and, if necessary, decontaminated thoroughly at least once a week in moderate temperatures. If a hummingbird feeder sits in the sun most of the day then the feeder may need to be cleaned every day or every other day, according to the California Audubon Society.

Feeder cleaning guidelines from the website [How to Enjoy Hummingbirds](#) provide guidance on how often to clean feeders. At daytime temperature of 71-75 degrees, change nectar/clean feeder every 6 days; for temperatures above 93 degrees, the feeder should be changed/cleaned daily.

If the feeder is moldy, the whole feeder should be soaked in a bleach and water solution. Mix a 10 percent bleach and water solution and soak the entire feeder for an hour.

More important, don't refill the feeder when it is empty without first cleaning it. A small amount left in a feeder for only a couple of hours, will ferment much quicker.

Here in Colorado, attracting hummingbirds to your home and garden provides hours of enjoyment but the bottom line is that unless you're willing to commit to regular cleaning of the feeders, you may be inadvertently killing the source of your pleasure.

## What do hummingbirds eat?

The Hummingbird diet consists of small soft body insects (aphids, gnats, small spiders, small fruit flies that feed on rotten fruit, etc.) and nectar from flowers which is mostly sucrose. When

you put up a feeder, you are providing them an easy access to only the sucrose part of their diet. This is very important when flower nectar is in short supply.

### **Do-it-yourself hummingbird nectar:**

The most beneficial and cheapest way to feed hummingbirds is to make your own nectar that has a 4:1 water-to-sugar ratio.

Use one part white sugar (but don't boil the sugar) and four parts boiled water. Cool the mixture to room temperature and then fill the feeder.

The 4:1 mixture approximates the water-to-sugar ratio present in the nectar of the flowers hummingbirds feed on. Too much sugar is hard on their liver and kidneys, and too little sugar will not provide the needed calories and may cause them to lose interest in your feeder.

### **What not to feed hummingbirds**

Do not use red dye in the nectar. Most feeders are designed with red parts to attract the notice of hummingbirds. Never add red food color to sugar water. Nectar in flowers is clear, and red food coloring may be harmful for hummingbirds.

Commercial hummingbird food is more expensive than the do-it-yourself nectar and is more vulnerable to bacterial and fungal growths

Never use honey to make hummingbird food. When honey is diluted with water, bacteria and fungus thrive in it.

**Greg Lowell**

**June 2015**