

FEEDING YOUR PARROT

The pet stores sell it, the supermarket stocks it and your bird probably even eats it - so you could be forgiven for thinking: *Birds just eat seed right?* But we could not be more mistaken. In fact, no one type of food is all your bird needs.

- In the wild, birds eat from a huge variety of different plants and we could not hope to emulate this type of selection in captivity. One thing we do know is that offering only seed to your bird will lead to health problems, and shorten your bird's life expectancy.
- We are all guilty of eating junk food from time to time and this is the way we should view seeds for our birds. A diet that consists only of junk food can lead to obesity, high cholesterol, malnutrition and ill health. In fact seed is such an unbalanced diet that even if you were to add in a large variety of fruit and vegetables this would still not compensate for the deficiencies. Seeds are sadly lacking in many vitamins and minerals including vitamin A. Vitamin A deficiency is a very common problem in pet birds and can lead to respiratory disease and other life threatening health problems.
- What is a good diet to feed your pet bird? The bulk of a pet parrot's diet (80%) should be a commercial pelleted food such as Harrison's, Kaytee or Nutriberries. These diets have a mixture of fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, grain and protein all mixed in together and formed into a pellet. This stops the birds selecting out their favourite bits and only eating the ingredient they like! But pellets alone are not enough. In addition to this you should be offering a large selection of fruits, nuts, vegetables and a very small amount of good quality seed used as a treat or training reward. Sprouted seeds can also be fed – see our separate handout.
- Suitable fruits and veg to feed include dark leafy greens (broccoli, spinach, kale, dandelion leaves), carrot, green beans, sugar snap peas, peppers, papaya, mango, melon, pomegranate.
- Sounds easy right? And it is, but it will require a bit of persistence on your part. Parrots are pretty smart and VERY good at manipulating us into giving them what they want. If you gave a child a choice between a balanced nutritious diet and ice cream you can predict what they would choose! Our birds are the same, but thankfully we know what is best and can make sure they get the balanced diet and avoid the health problems.
- There are several different ways to change the diet of a 'seed addict' but all involve a little persistence, cajoling and patience. For more information on how to do this successfully please see the handout "Changing Your Bird from a Seed to a Pellet Based Diet".

- Other foods to avoid include dairy products, tea, coffee, chocolate, avocado and salty or sugary foods. Some of these foods are quite toxic to birds.
- Remember to make it fun! Birds need to be kept busy with interesting things to do or they can engage in self destructive behaviours such as chewing or feather plucking.
- Remember to give them a challenge, feed nuts in the shell for bigger parrots; corn on the cob is much more interesting than corn in a bowl. You can even bake for them by making boiled rice with mixed vegetables, bird seed cooked in pancake mix as a special treat.
- Captive foraging is a term used to describe the process of making your bird seek or work for their food. Foraging is a very important part of their day in the wild and just serving your birds food up in a bowl day in day out can lead to boredom and destructive behaviours.
- You need to set your bird a challenge that is easy to begin with such as just putting a piece of paper over the top of the food bowl. Once they have mastered this you can make it a bit more difficult – wrap favourite food items partially in paper then move them to different places for more of a challenge. Place items inside cardboard toilet paper inserts or boxes. Once your bird has mastered this, you can increase the degree of difficulty by buying toys that you can hide things in. It is important not to make things too difficult to begin with or your bird will become discouraged and give up.