

# Feeding Finches the Conventional Way

Matthew M. Vriends, Ph.D.

All finches are principally seed eaters, which means they feed on all types of grass and weed seeds available in their native habitat. In captivity, finches in general, adapt easily to various kinds of millet – small-grained millet (panicum, for example) for all tropical and sub-tropical finches; large-grained millet (white millet, for example) for large birds such as Zebra Finches and Munias – and canary grass seed.

Millet spray, which is small-grained millet still on the stalk, provides very important nutrients for newly imported or recently hatched birds. Scatter a few “ears” or “spikes” of millet spray so the birds can peck at them from all sides.

Many finches enjoy niger, rape, and linseed, which are rich in minerals. However, they also are high in fat and should be offered only in small quantities. Excessive consumption can cause liver problems.

Brown rice, which is included in some ready-made commercial bird seed mixtures, is suitable for Diamond Finches, some *Lonchura* species and a few other finches with strong, large beaks. However, it can lead to death in some birds, such as the Pin-tailed Parrot Finch (*Erythrura prasina*).

Soaked kernels of wheat and oats are much better additions to the basic food given to strong-beaked finches. These soaked grains may constitute as much as two-thirds of the total amount of sprouted food. However, birds in cramped quarters grow fat easily on oats.

All seed should be clean, dry, free of dust, and of good quality to prevent birds from ingesting harmful germs. Various excellent commercial seed mixtures are available on the market. Always check the date of packing; do not buy packages that are more than half a year (tops!) old.

## Sprouted Seed

In addition to dry food, various finch species need sprouted seeds. During the winter, these substitute for green foods and immature seeds. They contain valuable nutrients,

including vitamin E, which is particularly important during the mating season.

There are various ways to produce sprouts, but a fresh batch must be started every day. Here are two tested methods for sprouted seeds:

- Mix two parts small-grained millet and one part canary grass seed in a large pot. Add water to soak so the seeds will swell. To speed up the process, place the pot on a radiator or in a warm room. Place the seeds in a sieve and rinse thoroughly under running water two or three times a day. Return them to the pot with fresh water. After 24 hours, the seeds are ready for use. Dry them lightly with a clean towel, then mix in a few drops of cod-liver oil. This helps the sprouts remain moist longest, adds to their nutritional value, and supplies vitamin D.

- Mix two-thirds small-grained millet, a little large-grained millet and no more than one fourth canary grass seed in a pot. Add water to soak so the seeds can swell, and leave them for 12 hours. Place the seeds in a sieve and rinse thoroughly under running water. Return them to the pot, cover it and let it sit for another 24 hours. The seeds then may be fed to the birds.

The choice of seeds to be sprouted depends, of course, on the tastes of your birds. Exotic finches from Africa like small-grained millet and canary grass seed, while those from Australia (Zebra Finches, Gouldians, etc.) also enjoy soaked large-grained millet.

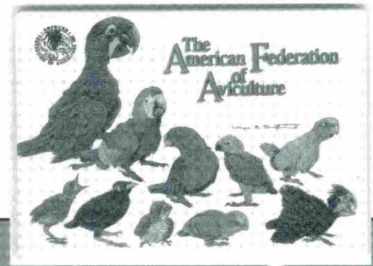
Spikes or ears of millet can be sprouted as described above, but it is extremely important to change the water frequently so the cores of the spikes will not rot. Discard the water after 24 hours and set the spikes upright in a glass. Let the glass stand on a radiator for another day, until the sprouts become visible. The sprouts then may be fed to the birds.

Millet also may be sown in small flower pots or saucers. After a few days, pots containing sprouted millet may be placed in the aviary. Finches enjoy eating the

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young, 1-inch tall plants.

Don't provide more sprouted seed than the birds can eat in a single day. Remove any leftovers in the evening because soured seed can cause intestinal problems.

To create a green corner in a garden aviary, plant some weed seeds on the floor, and leave some of the seed that spills around the feeding dish. When these seeds sprout and germinate, the birds will roost around them.

### **Green Food**

Finches should receive an abundance of fresh green food. This includes chickweed, collard, leaf and bibb lettuce, endive, spinach, cabbage, pieces of carrots and carrot tops, celery leaves, broccoli, dandelion, etc.

Fresh greens may be found in meadows and fields, and along country lanes. However, plants growing alongside busy roads will be contaminated by exhaust fumes. Owners who lack a sure source of organic greens should grow them themselves.

In the case of English rye grass, wild millets, and annual paniced grasses (except dandelions), give finches the entire seed head along with the stem. With dandelions, pick off the top of plant after all the yellow petals have fallen off. Give finches the entire chickweed plant; they eat the seeds and also pick at the leaves.

In addition, home-grown millet is very popular with exotic finches. The ears should be harvested in the fall when they are partially ripe.

### **Fruit**

Many exotic finches love to nibble on pieces of apples, pears, bananas, tomatoes, oranges, melons, cherries, grapes, grapefruit, berries, raisins, and currants (the latter two also may be given soaked). Big pieces of fruit should be provided on feeding spikes, such as nails hammered into a board, so they will stay clean. Greens and fruit also can be provided in wire baskets sold commercially for this purpose. However, some of the contents are bound to fall out.

### **Food of Animal Origin**

Practically all exotic finches like to eat food of animal origin – insects such as termites, and pupae ("ant eggs"), small spiders, and similar material, as well as man-made substitutes such as egg food, rearing food, etc. Such foods become a necessity during the breeding season.

The amount of animal protein needed on a daily basis or when young are being raised varies considerably among different finch species. Thin-beaked finches, particularly those from Africa, require much more animal food than birds with heavy beaks.

Eggs are the cheapest source of animal protein, and various excellent commercial products are on the market. Mealworms, the larval form of the darkling beetle, are

another source of animal protein-However, finches will only rarely eat live mealworms, even when the larvae are quite small. They prefer chopped and freshly scaled or just hatched mealworms. They do not eat the entire larva; they merely suck out the inside and leave the empty chitin shell.

A good menu includes moths, fly larvae, and *enchytrea* (= white worms), with occasional substitutes of tubifex, red mosquito larvae, and water fleas (*daphnia*) for variety. Rearing and egg food are best bought commercially. Even these may be enriched with finely diced boiled egg and small insects.

### **Vitamins, Minerals, and Trace Elements**

Finches living free in their native habitats select from a great variety of insects, seeds, and fruits to complete their diets. It is difficult for us to duplicate these dietary elements, hard as we might try. This can lead to vitamin deficiencies among captive birds. Fortunately, many commercial multivitamins are available as supplements to these birds' normal diets.

Finches also need to have access to supplements with minerals and trace elements, which are essential for proper plumage, good bone structure, and healthy internal organs. These elements are present in finely ground boiled egg shell (commercially available) and oyster shell, cuttlebone, enriched limestone, and commercial low-salt grit. However, the grit should not have a high charcoal content because some scientists believe charcoal removes vitamins A, B2, and K from the intestinal tract and contributes to vitamin deficiency.

### **Drinking Water**

The aviary "waterer" I like best has a little rock with running water and a small gutter to drain excess water – but it is rather costly to install and in many states it must be shut off in winter. Therefore, most bird fanciers use water bottles with stainless steel drinking tubes, or earthenware dishes. The latter solution, however, isn't very hygienic because finches bathe in their drinking water. Small water fonts and automatic waterers don't get as dirty and, of course, birds can't bathe in them.

Any open water dishes should be covered with wire mesh so the birds cannot bathe in them. This is especially important during winter and in colder climates to prevent birds from freezing.

Check the water supply at least once a day, more often (several times per day) during hot summer weather. Bathing dishes get dirty rather quickly and must be cleaned regularly.

For a special treat, dissolve some honey or grape sugar (glucose) in the birds' drinking water several times per week. Occasionally, give them a small dish of fruit juice. Remember to cover these dishes with wire netting so

birds won't bathe in them.

If the water is highly chlorinated, supply rain water instead of tap water. Boil it, then cool it for at least three hours before giving it to the birds. Spring water, available commercially in various brands, also is excellent.

### Feeding Tips

Nothing is as important as getting finches accustomed to a fixed daily rou-

time. Furnish drinking water, bath water, and food at the same time each day. Rearing food and other soft food can be furnished with the regular morning food. This way, the finches can consume it as needed – especially if any nestlings must be fed. It also minimizes chances of spoilage. Remember to remove any leftover perishable food from the cage or aviary each evening (again, at a regular time).

Always maintain the same appearance when working around finches. If you wear glasses, always wear them. If you wear a hat in winter, wear it in summer, too. Wear a dust coat to protect your clothes and standardize your appearance. When it wears out, try to buy a replacement of the same color. Keep up this appearance whenever you do any work in the birdroom or aviary, or near the birds!

Provide seed in open dishes (with a lip) or automatic feeders. Before adding fresh seed, blow away empty hulls. If using automatic feeders, remember to check that the seed flow isn't jammed.

Wash out the dishes every time you provide fresh bathing and drinking water. As you perform these chores, softly whistle a tune or talk quietly to the birds to keep them calm. A regular routine – regular whistling or humming, regular clothes, regular chore time – helps the birds become accustomed to your presence. Consequently, they will not become upset even if you need to look into the nest during the breeding season or when you perform chores near them while they are brooding or feeding their young.

Take the opportunity to individually examine birds in the collection. Pick a time other than the breeding season, or do it when you are moving birds indoors from the garden aviary. Lay each bird on its back in the palm of your hand, and then blow aside some breast and stomach feathers so you can inspect the skin. The breast and stomach should have a healthy red color. The presence of any yellow discoloration generally indicates that the bird has grown too fat on too many oil-rich seeds. This situation can be corrected by adjusting the bird's diet gradually, and by housing it in a facility where it has more room to exercise. ❖

## Pacific Parrotlets:

Pastel Yellow White	Isabel Pastelblue Lucida	Fallow Fallowblue Dark Green	Blue Isabelblue Splits & Double Splits	Lutino Albino
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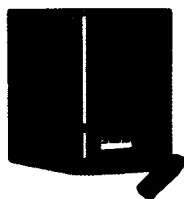
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