

In AFFamily Way

(tips from one bird lover to another)

by Linda Sun
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Long ago in my early years of raising birds, I remember reading about the benefits of feeding weeds to birds. Being reluctant to jump onto bandwagons, I tucked this interesting information away for future reference. Actually, I forgot about it until a day when I felt eyes on me when I happened to be pulling weeds. Looking up, I noticed the nearest pair of birds watching (you know how they tilt their heads and beam the closer eye down at you?). Disbelieving, I asked, "Do you guys want some of this?" They only continued watching, so I poked a little through the wires. Manna from heaven! The more weeds I gave them, the happier they seemed to be. All the other birds reacted the same way. My feeling has always been that our birds would be happy to teach us things if only we knew how to pay attention and this was one of my first lessons, judging from their responses. From then on, my birds had lots of freshly pulled weeds since there seemed to be no limit to their need for a weed.

The years went by and more information was learned. One of the things I discovered was the problem of disease, soil organisms, bacteria, fungi, and so on. I began to think that maybe I was doing them more harm than good by giving the birds weeds with some dirt still clinging to the roots. I began to wash off most of the dirt, but soon I stopped giving them weeds at all. The back yard is never sprayed, but who knows what "contaminants" the wild birds might leave in the lawn? For that matter, a different pair of my own birds might "shed" something which could drift onto the lawn and "infect" another pair. Well, couldn't they? Better safe than sorry, was my thinking then.

My birds are almost all parrots, but a few years ago I won a pair of doves at a bird club raffle. The following spring they received a cockatiel nest box and pine shavings, but with a slightly different arrangement than is usual for the lid. Feeling ignorant and being willing to try anything that might make them happy (now that I knew how chancy breeding could be) I grabbed a handful of tall grassy weeds that had sprouted after

the rains. Whenever I am going to push anything through the wires at a bird, I always approach, and move, very slowly. The dove with the smaller head watched that handful of weeds intently and when it finally reached the wires she started pulling it through as fast as she could. I stepped back and saw her perform a charming dance. She sorted through the pieces with her bill, chose a stalk and held it aloft and stretched her neck high, twirling the stem in her bill, then judged its balance or weight by angling her head side-to-side and turning around. If she was satisfied, she flew it to the nest box. When she had enough weeds, she and her mate settled in and started churning out babies like clockwork. I cannot make her stop producing, but the dove and pigeon experts tell me this is not harmful. She and her mate and their continuous line of babies get a great diet and occasionally new weeds.

Early this spring I felt an urge to make the "good" grass look nice and began removing the weeds in those sections. I gave some to the doves and suddenly it felt wrong to deny these to the parrots. They were elated and somehow after all these years, it did not seem to be so bad if there was a little dirt on the roots. After that, I made a point of giving the parrots all the weeds I could. The birds made a point of showing their appreciation by bobbing up and down or making happy sounds when they saw the greenery coming. Even the usually timid birds come to the wires and help the weeds pass through, taking them right from my fingers. Pairs which I had not expected to breed are setting eggs. Those who already have babies seem to have larger chicks this year. It is possible that this year's successes are due to other factors, but I'm beginning to suspect that a large part of it is due to the magic of weeds.

Looking backward, in my early years I seem to have led a breeder's charmed life. I had attributed that to either the dumb luck that beginners sometimes have, or that I had been fortunate enough to purchase good birds from good people. In the intervening weed-free years, however, these same good birds have not done

as well. Could it be that all these years, the answer to a matings prayer was right there at my feet? If you are not already using the weed feed, you might want to try it with any reluctant or "problem" pairs first and see if they finally decide to "get in a family way." ●

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