

If you have a live Christmas tree, Oklahoma State University Extension has an idea for an additional family present once the holiday is over. Don't throw out the tree – instead, put it in your backyard to attract and help wildlife, particularly birds. Oklahoma families looking for a fun activity after the holidays should look no further than the fresh-cut Christmas tree in their living room, OSU Extension said in a news release. The tree came into the home from nature and now, after the sound of jingle bells fade away, it can be returned to nature, the release said. Once the ornaments and lights have been removed, consider using the fresh-cut tree to help the wildlife in your landscape – particularly our feathered friends, said David Hillock, Oklahoma State University Extension consumer horticulturist. You'll not only be providing food and habitat for the bird population but also providing hours of fun for your family. Place the tree outdoors in the tree stand, a bucket of dirt or even tied to a fence post, and decorate it with tasty treats for the birds to provide them with nourishment needed in the cold, winter months. The tree will also add visual interest to what can sometimes be a bleak winter landscape. Natural wreaths and garland can also be used. To attract birds, OSU Extension said, use cotton or another natural fiber to hang the natural ornaments because the birds can use this material later for nesting. Some easy ideas include: Strings of cranberries, popcorn or cereal. Slices of fresh apples or oranges. Pinecones smeared with peanut butter and rolled in a bird seed mix or black oil seeds. Garlands of red or green grapes. Small mesh bags filled with chopped fruit. Sometimes young children may be sad when it's time to take down the tree and other decorations, but turning it into a bird feeder can extend the joy of the holiday a little longer, said Casey Hentges, host of OSU Agriculture's television program Oklahoma Gardening. It's also a great outdoors activity for your kids to burn off some energy from those sugary treats they may have eaten during the holidays, she said. Hentges offered

a word of caution when using peanut butter as part of bird food treats

when temperatures are warmer than normal. “When it’s warm outside, the oil can separate and get on the birds’ feathers, which makes them unable to regulate their temperatures,”

Hentges said. “One way to combat that issue is to mix the peanut butter

with cornmeal. The cornmeal will help absorb the oil, but the peanut butter will

still be sticky enough for the bird seed to stick to it.” It can

also be a fun educational opportunity for families, she said, adding that learning doesn’t

have to stop during the Christmas holiday simply because school is out. “Turn this

time into an ongoing science project,” Hentges said. “Together with your children, learn about

wildlife that’s right in your own backyard. For the best results, don’t place the

tree right next to your home. Move it toward the back part of your

yard so you won’t scare the birds when you’re trying to observe them.” She

also suggested a variation on bird hunting: Check out a library book about Oklahoma

birds and keep track of how many can be found feasting on the treats

hung on the tree. To learn even more about what types of birds or

other wildlife that visit the tree when you aren’t watching, attach a trail camera

to the tree to get an up-close view of the new backyard friends. “Even

though the holidays can go by quickly, turning your fresh-cut tree into a bird

feeder is one way to extend that feeling of joy,” Hentges said. For those

who may not want to turn the old Christmas tree into a bird feeder,

check with city officials about a tree recycling program. In many communities, trees are

collected and turned into mulch for local parks and public gardens. OSU Extension offers

additional information online regarding landscaping and gardening to attract birds at bit.ly/OSUBirds. Featured video