

Enrichment Corner: The Toy Box

Food Items for Fun Foraging

by Desi Milpacher

Birds like to be busy, so providing them with food foraging items is a good thing: it encourages an activity that birds naturally do a lot of. It's also necessary for their survival (In fact, in the wild they spend almost three-quarters of their day doing it.) Because of this the benefits of food foraging toys are two-fold. One, the bird gets busy getting at the food, and two, he enjoys the tid-bit at the end of all the work.

Author and keen parrot observer Kris Porter writes: "The more I incorporate food into the toys I make for my parrots, the more I see and understand how important foraging is for them. I can put toys in the cage with all sorts of materials they like and I get some interest and activity. I have observed that their level of interest in a toy increases if I put food on it or in it. I find I can also get them to keep active much longer with a toy that has food incorporated into it."

The ideas below are relatively inexpensive and quick to make. And, as always, safety is job one – make sure your feathered friend can't get head, toes or other important anatomical parts caught in their various playthings, particularly items containing rope.

Materials needed:

- Wooden or stainless steel skewers (pointed end cut off wooden ones after skewering on food; stainless steel ones generally have a cap)
- Untreated, clean woven baskets
- Materials such as sea grass rope, dried palm leaf ribbon, clean polished stones, shredded unbleached paper, brown wrapping paper, plain cardboard
- Dixie cups (plain)
- Small gift or other boxes (2"x 2" or so) – can get these from dollar stores

- Unbleached basket-type coffee filters
- Clean, dry raffia rope, or Paulie rope
- Paper coin wrappers
- Clean cardboard egg cartons
- Food-safe PVC piping
- Commercial food foraging parrot toys
- Foods (organic if at all possible): kale, chickweed, dandelion, Swiss chard, collards, root vegetable tops, apples, squashes, zucchinis or vegetable marrow, patty pans, broccoli, broccolini, pomegranate, peppers (sweet or hot), grass seeds, herbs, peas-in-the-pod, artichokes (with thorny parts cut off), dried chilis, salt-free brown rice cakes, Cheerios, commercial parrot treats, unsalted air-popped popcorn, and pellets. *Note:* If using soft foods (ie: fresh fruits and vegetables) remove from cage after a few hours before bacteria begins to build up in it. Also keep in mind that some treats (peanuts, pine nuts and nuts) are high in fat, and should be used sparingly.

When it comes to building toys for birds, and keeping safety issues in mind, the sky is really the limit. And in this case, easy - start with basic elements then add the food item:

- Take unbleached or brown paper, use dry treats such as pellets, a single roasted peanut, air-popped popcorn or a dried chili, and wrap it up in a ball. Watch them discover the treat inside.
- Wrap treats in plain paper and stuff into the compartments of an egg carton. Or wrap treats in green leafy vegetables such as Swiss chard, and stuff into the carton.

- Use wooden or stainless steel skewers to pin different fruits, vegetables, greens or brown rice cake (alternate different foods) and attach to cage with parrot-safe clip. Make sure pointy ends are either covered with a cap or cut off.
- Use small gift boxes or Dixie cups to hide food items inside. Hang from perches, or hide in leafy branches to make it more challenging. Use two or three Dixie cups alternating with one food item, one cup, all fitted together in layers. Or wrap the food item in small piece of paper, then put inside box.
- Stuff coin wrappers (ones that haven't been used for coins) with food items such as brown rice cake or leafy greens. Or wrap dry treats in unbleached paper and stuff into the rolls.
- Take an unbleached coffee filter, fill it with treats, and tie it all up with raffia to make a pouch. (Use toy under supervision due to tied raffia).
- Use heat-sterilized pinecones stuffed with bits of fruit, vegetable, brown rice cake, berries, commercial bird treats or pellets. Make it more challenging by wrapping dry food items in small squares of paper, then stuffing the cone.
- Stuff food-safe PVC piping with any number of food items, making it more challenging by concealing the items in paper wrapping.
- Take large leafy greens, broccoli or broccolini and thread through cage wire for a challenge, or hide in leafy branches so they can go foraging. Wrap small treat inside green leaf and do the same.
- Use clean, woven baskets or plastic container and fill with clean, polished stones. Sprinkle grass seed (sourced from seed companies or pesticide-free area around your house) in amongst the stones, and watch them forage. Other small treats can be used, too.

- Again using baskets or other containers fill this time with shredded palm leaf, shredded raffia, paper or plain cardboard, or bits of sea grass rope and hide treats in the pile.
- Commercial toys can be used: plastic play stands and specially made parrot hidden treat toys can be used to scatter or hide treats. Clean thoroughly between each use.
- Cut in half a whole pomegranate, small squash, apple (seeds removed) or other fruits and vegetables and secure to cage for them to feast on for a few hours. Cut in half a sweet bell pepper and watch them go after the seeds. Remember to remove promptly.
- Offer broccoli or broccolini that has gone to flower and watch them pick the blooms off.
- Core out zucchini or marrow and stuff with low-calorie treats.
- Use bunches of herbs or root vegetable tops to tempt them to chew.
- Grow your own grasses, using clean potting soil, and let them forage once it is tall enough. If you have it in your yard, use clean, pesticide-free grass that has gone to seed for more foraging fun.

The combinations and permutations are endless. Many treats can be used to tempt your feathered friend – but be careful with some. High salt foods may be harmful, and high-fat foods such as nuts and peanuts can be troublesome for birds that tend to be overweight. WPT supporter Arlene Roth writes: “My little conure isn’t supposed to eat nuts and other high-fat foods. However, she LOVES a toy/food that our avian vet recommended: Organic, salt-free brown-rice cakes.

Such fun for Pickle to crumble, shred, and dip into her water dish (just be sure to clean the water dish thoroughly afterward). Pickle absolutely DEMANDS a half of a rice cake for “dessert” every night.’ Also: “Another Pickle favorite comes to mind: the “Bag o’ Fun.” Get some small, empty muslin teabags – you can often find them in health-food stores or tea-shops – and fill them about halfway with pellets (we use Harrison’s) and some tiny pieces of uncooked pasta. Trim the strings so your birdy’s feet don’t get tangled. Pickle loves to tear into the bags, making a hole-y mess, but such fun!” Arlene has found ways to get around the fattening treat problem, and you can, too.

In sum, the ways to treat and tempt your parrot are numerous, with many more yet to be discovered by the most enterprising minds. With careful consideration of your bird’s needs and safety you can build a library of ideas to keep him busy and happy. So let your imagination go wild – your bird with thank you for it.

Sources:

Kris Porter, et al., Parrot Enrichment Activity Book 2.0

http://www.parrots.org/pdfs/all_about_parrots/reference_library/PEAB2.pdf

Parrot Enrichment <http://parrotenrichment.com/foraging.html>

Foraging for Parrots <http://foragingforparrots.com/>

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