

For the Birds! Making “Native Seed Bomb Suet”

By Aubree Keurajian

Whether you’re fighting barberry, burning bush, or bittersweet, you certainly know that birds are very effective seed distributors; they are to blame for spreading many of these species far and wide, though to no fault of their own, as these plants, and others, were often planted intentionally as bird food. By understanding this situation, we can work to reverse-engineer a solution by the same means. If we provide native berries for the birds, we can utilize their seed spreading capabilities to help put native plants back on the landscape beyond our own yards. To this end, I’ve developed “seed



bomb” suet cakes. Unlike regular suet cakes which are filled with seeds that the birds digest, seed bomb suet cakes are made with whole berries. As the birds eat the suet, they digest the fruit of the berry and pass the seeds. This passage through the gut involves acid and physical grinding, which is necessary for many seeds to germinate. This means that the bird gets a meal packed with fats and protein from the suet itself and sugars and antioxidants from the fruit of the berries, and the plants get their seeds dispersed. In making this suet, I’ve discovered a few unintentional benefits. According to my customers, the squirrels seem to ignore the berry suet, and according to the Audubon Society, so do house sparrows.

My “seed bomb suet” is made from 9 species of native berry locally collected in Durham, Connecticut: black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*), winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), common blackberry (*Rubus allegheniensis*), blackcap raspberry (*Rubus occidentalis*), silky dogwood (*Swida amomum*), red osier dogwood (*Swida sericea*), gray dogwood (*Swida sericea*), and just a little poke (*Phytolacca americana*) for color. These berries are held together with organic dual purpose beef tallow from Butter Meat Co. What’s Butter Meat? And what’s dual purpose beef? Butter Meat Co. is a woman-owned purveyor of organic dual-purpose beef in the far west of upstate NY, aka Dairy Country! Dual purpose beef is meat from retired dairy cows, which is more environmentally and economically sustainable (and more delicious!). One beef cow produces only around 600 pounds of food in its lifetime, whereas a dual purpose dairy cow produces closer to 20,000. By turning these cows into high grade meat once they are done producing milk, dual purpose beef provides a new income source for struggling dairy farmers. Check out their curated meat boxes at buttermeatco.com, or swing by the shop in Perry, NY.

I have a limited quantity of my 9 berry suet still available! \$10/5 oz. block, shipping included. Due to the importance of keeping native plants native, suet can only be shipped within Connecticut. Email ungardenit@gmail.com to purchase.

If you want to make your own, here are a few tips and tricks:

1. Make sure you have landowner permission to collect berries!
2. Know what you're collecting! There are over 4,000 species of plants in Connecticut, and about half are introduced, are you sure about your species ID? Sometimes knowing what a plant is for sure means seeing it in all growing seasons, and many are almost impossible to ID without a flower. Make sure you're not accidentally spreading invasive or other introduced species.
3. Freeze your berries right when you collect them until you have enough to make a batch. This way you can have a bigger variety of berries.
4. I've found 2-3 pounds of suet renders down to enough tallow for one gallon bag of berries, but it will vary based on quality.
5. You can buy suet from almost any meat market, and even grocery store meat counters will save it for you if you ask.
6. To render your suet, chop it into small pieces and then use a slow cooker. (I use the leftover bits to make dog food!)
7. To mix the suet, pour the tallow into a large flat pan, sprinkle the frozen berries evenly across the top, and then mix mix mix! It will solidify as you're mixing it, I personally like to use my hands so that I can make sure there aren't big pockets of berries.
8. Don't cook the berries! Cooking the berries will make them less digestible to the birds and could kill the seeds. If it sets wrong let it warm to room temperature slowly, and then you can reshape it.
9. If you have lots of little shards from cutting it, put them in a zippered plastic bag and leave at room temperature until they melt, then you can freeze it back into one piece.
10. Keep suet frozen, fresh berries spoil easily.
11. It may take your birds a little while to warm up to a new food, they are cautious creatures.

Happy Kitchening!

- **Aubree Keurajian, Ungardening Native Plants**