

sprouting for parrots

Finding ways to provide parrots with a healthy and diverse diet can be challenging, especially if you hope most of the food ends up in the bird rather than on the bottom of the cage or aviary. One option a lot of us have tried is sprouted seeds or beans, although from an informal survey of friends and colleagues, initial attempts aren't always successful. I like the idea of providing variety for captive parrots and thought it might be useful to share some of what I've learned through my own (first failed, later successful) attempts at sprouting, in hopes it might help others get started.

Before delving in to the details of "how to" sprout for parrots, I should say something about the "why". It's not hard to poke around the web and find all sorts of fantastic claims about the phenomenal healing and nurturing properties of sprouted seeds – sprouts touted as super foods, miracle foods that cure what ails you (or your bird)! In addition to claims about vitamins, enzymes, proteins, and anti-oxidant potential, I even bumped into one pro-sprouts website claiming an increase in sodium levels of 690%. While there has been some legitimate science done

on the nutritional changes which occur during the first few days for select sprouting seeds, addressing this question is well beyond the scope of this article. If you're interested in delving deeper, follow the links on www.psittascene.org.

Although I'm not going to make grandiose claims about the miracle of sprouts, there are good biological reasons to believe that there are nutritionally meaningful differences between seeds and sprouts. In principle, to compare the nutrients available in a seed vs. a sprouted seed, you're comparing resources which are stored and dormant (dry seed), with a living bit of a plant which has mobilized those stored resources, and converted them into rapidly growing tissue which is very much alive. Consequently, there are a huge number of changes in the physiology of the plant, and those really do correspond to substantial changes in the nutritive compounds we're interested in feeding our birds, including proteins, enzymes, vitamins, etc. That said, minerals for the most part are neither created nor destroyed, so any claims about major changes in mineral content should be taken with a grain of salt!

shop

So let's assume you're interested in sprouting some seeds for your birds. First, you need some raw materials. And when I say raw, I really do mean raw. Seeds, beans, nuts, and pulses are often treated for human consumption. For example, you can't start with roasted nuts and I've had little luck with packages of dry beans sold in plastic bags at the grocery store – they look nice and clean and ready to go, but they just wouldn't sprout for me no matter what I tried. If you have a health food store or co-op which sells beans, seeds and lentils in bulk, that's probably your best option, especially if they're labeled as "organic." It's not necessarily because they were produced without pesticides – although that too is a good thing for your birds – but because they're less likely to be treated and therefore more likely to sprout well.

Just about any raw seed which is whole will sprout easily, including oats, rice and other grains and cereals, peas, beans, lentils and other members of the pea family. Any of the oil seeds like safflower, sunflower, and even sesame are also possibilities. I would recommend buying a handful of each type for starters. Then proceed based on how well they sprout and ultimately how well your birds like them.

Generally speaking, the process comes down to two stages:

1. Soaking to start the germination process and,
2. Rinsing to encourage healthy growth as the seeds begin to sprout.

Seeds suitable for sprouting are generally found in bulk at co-ops or natural food stores.



by Jamie Gilardi

soak

Now you've arrived home with various bags of seeds and you're ready to start sprouting. Find some wide mouthed containers, ideally glass, which will hold at least 8 oz (.25 l). Wash them well and fill each about 1/4 full of seeds – one for each variety. Smooth, vertical walled containers are best. Fill with water and swirl as needed to wash. Then fill the container 3/4 full of water and set it aside to soak overnight. Some people recommend treating the seeds initially with either chlorine or grapefruit seed extract; I haven't found these steps to be necessary.

Some seeds (especially beans) soak up a lot of water and grow in size, some swell very little, but all will expand as they sprout so make sure you leave enough room. Soaking the seeds overnight is enough to get them started. I usually rinse them a couple of times after that overnight soak, drain them well, and then set them aside in their jar to let them do their thing.

Sprouting seeds for your parrot can offer a valuable new source of nutrition as well as enrichment. Many types of seeds can be sprouted easily at home.



rinse

After that initial soak, rinse and drain your seeds at least twice a day, perhaps when you normally feed your bird(s).

Some people use a bit of window screen or other light mesh to aid in the rinse and drain procedure. You can also buy special sprouting containers. Though screens and special jars work great, your hand and simple canning jars or other repurposed containers can do the job nicely too.

Some beans sprout very quickly. Mung beans swell fast and start putting out a root in less than 24 hours. Others take several days before you can see them sprouting. Some just never sprout, and those you can toss and then pass up that variety next time you're shopping. For some reasons white beans (cannellini and limas) tend to smell bad when you're sprouting and our birds (two African Greys) just ignored them – so I don't bother with them anymore.

feed

We currently feed our birds 3-6 different sorts of sprouted seeds twice each day, along with their other foods - fresh fruits, seeds, pellets, etc.

Start out with small amounts added to their regular diet, adding more as you note your birds eating more of the sprouts over time. Feed any time after the soaking period and use up before they're putting out green leaves (although that's not necessarily a bad thing for them).

One aspect of sprouting which I can't really address is the virtue of using pre-packaged sprout mixes available for parrots. There are lots of options available, but while the mixes are convenient, they are also more expensive than buying your own in bulk. It really depends on your preferences and what is available in your area.

be safe

Speaking of off-odor Canellinis, I find most of the sprouts smell really good and fresh, maybe like a salad with no dressing on it. And just like anything you're eating, feeding to your friends, your kids or your birds, if you have any concerns about a particular batch of sprouts, just dump them, wash the container well and start over.

Another word of caution regarding sprouts and parrots: by creating a moist environment for days at a time at room temperature, you are creating an environment in which other things can grow too. It really helps a lot that 1) you've rinsed them well before soaking, 2) you're rinsing them at least twice a day, and 3) that the seeds themselves are alive and growing. But as you've likely heard, sprouts sold



for human consumption have very occasionally become contaminated by nasty microbes like Salmonella. For this reason, I only start the amount of sprouts that I know our birds will consume while they're young, fresh, and growing rapidly. I don't store them in the refrigerator for use at a later date – that to me is asking for trouble. One last thought along these lines: don't buy any seeds which include a lot of broken bits – those will not germinate but the bits will potentially encourage microbial growth which you're aiming to minimize.

I like the idea of offering lots of options to our birds and seeing what they really like and what they ignore. As when offering anything new, it's a good idea to be patient and give them

time to experiment and maybe even develop a taste for new food items. Our birds are well into their third and fourth decade, and as far as we know, sprouts are an entirely new experience for them both. They ignored all sprouts for weeks, but eventually they grew more interested and now sprouts make up a large portion of their diet.

Early on, I would occasionally "sweeten the pot" by pouring a bit of coconut oil or red palm oil over the sprouts and that seemed to help get them started. I also found that slightly sprouted sunflower seeds were immediately attractive to them and may have helped them develop a taste for other sprouts. Now, their favorites are still sunflower seeds and red beans, but I have a lot of options

yet to try. In any case, once you have a sense for what your birds like, you can make your own mix of just the seeds your birds prefer, or if you can find a commercial mix that's similar, that may be your best option.

Although sprouting may sound complicated it really takes only minutes. Put some seeds in a jar, wash if needed and soak them overnight, then rinse them twice a day. In a few days, sprouts! Enjoy!



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Experiment with a variety of seed types to determine which sprout best and what your bird(s) prefer.