

Build-your-own Solar Birdbath

It is well known that birds are attracted to water, especially running water. However, most fountains or small ponds require 120-V electrical power which is expensive to install and potentially dangerous. This article will show you a solar-powered alternative you can make yourself. The design uses readily available parts, is inexpensive (about \$85), easy to maintain, and is relatively easy to build and install.

Two 5-gallon buckets are used: one for a reservoir and a second one that functions as a casing. A 14 inch saucer - the kind that goes under a potted plant - forms the birdbath basin. Water from the reservoir is pumped to the basin by a solar-powered pump. It then drains back to the reservoir via a 1 inch standpipe.

The display photos show how the system is assembled. (The casement bucket is not shown.)



Birdbath Components



Assembled Birdbath

Modification of Component Parts

Buckets

One of the buckets is used as a reservoir, the other as a casement vessel to keep the hole from caving in when the reservoir bucket is removed for cleaning. The reservoir bucket nests in the casement bucket which is partially buried. If you want to have the birdbath well above ground level, you may want to use a mound of large rocks and soil to create a natural appearance. An alternative for a patio is to use half of an oak barrel, partially filled with soil and vegetation, with the birdbath in the middle.

- Cut a notch (about ½” sq.) in the top rim of the reservoir bucket for the tubing and electrical line to pass through. A hacksaw blade works well for this.
- Drill several holes (¼” to ½” in diameter) in the bottom of the casement bucket to allow any spilled water to drain.

- You can spray paint the top of the buckets if desired. Roughing up the surface with fine sand paper will improve adhesion.

Basin

The birdbath basin shown is a sturdy 14” terracotta saucer made of polyethylene. Other options and colors are available from garden stores and the Home Depot although the basin shown is recommended.

- Drill a 7/8” diameter hole in the basin about 3¼” in from the rim.
- Make a gasket (2” diameter with a 1” hole) from an old inner-tube or cork sheet to fit the standpipe. Various sealants may also be used.
- Install the standpipe (a kitchen spray hose guide) with the threaded portion on the bottom and gasket on the top face of the basin. This will maintain a one inch water depth in the basin.

Tubing and Pump Assembly

The pump kit comes with several plastic fountain parts and spray heads that are not needed for this project. Slip the plastic tubing over the pump outlet. Heating the end of the tubing in hot water will make this task easier. Use several cable ties to keep the tubing and electrical cord together for about 18 inches.

Installation

Reservoir and Basin

Select a location that is good for viewing. It is desirable to have some bushes nearby that the birds can use for protection should a hawk approach. If cats are a problem the bushes should be trimmed up so birds can see the cat. A small wire screen can also be used to protect the birds.

- Dig a hole for the casement bucket. The bucket should extend at least one inch above the surface and must be level. (If you don’t have a level, place the basin on the bucket and add a little water to check for a level surface.) Add about two inches of gravel or small rocks to the bucket and back fill the dirt around the sides of the bucket. If it is difficult to remove the reservoir without pulling up the casement bucket, empty out some of the water or put a lid on the bucket. This will prevent it from becoming egg shaped and binding when lifted.
- Use a 1½” sink strainer over the standpipe to keep feathers and leaves from getting in the reservoir.
- Place a few rocks in the basin to give it a natural look and added weight. Animals may try to use the basin and knock it off center. If this is a problem, try placing four small stakes around the perimeter of the basin to keep it in place.

Spout Placement

Place a small post near the basin such that it will support the copper tubing which will be bent into an arc over the basin. Carefully bend the tubing to the desired shape. Use a curved form such as a soup can for sharp bends to avoid crimping. The water flow from

the tubing should go into the reservoir even if the basin is removed. Use cable ties, wire staples or other means to attach the copper tubing to the support post. Make sure the spout end of the tubing is high enough so the reservoir bucket will not hit it when removed. Once the placement of the post and tubing have been determined, cut off the excess copper tubing and slip the 3/8" plastic tubing on the copper tubing. Use a small hose clamp or wire wrap to make a leak proof connection. Use dirt, rocks or leaves to hide the exposed tubing.

Solar Collector Placement

Position the solar collector facing south and tilted to about a 45 degree angle. It should be high enough to receive direct sunlight. The collector can be slipped over a 2"x 2" cut at a 45 degree angle with the sharp end slightly trimmed back.



Sample Installation

Maintenance

Minimal maintenance is required. Check the water level every few days, especially if the birdbath has had a lot of use. (Birds will splash a surprising amount of water out of the bath.) Avoid having bare dirt adjacent to the birdbath to reduce the amount soil tracked into the bath.

During periods of warm weather algae may buildup after about a week. To clean the reservoir, cover or unplug the solar collector so the pump will stop. Remove the basin and set the pump to the side on a dirt free surface. Lift out the reservoir for cleaning. Having a clean spare reservoir bucket to replace the dirty one makes this job go faster.

Sit back and enjoy watching birds get a drink and frolic in their new bath. During migration periods expect to see more activity and different species.

These instructions are available on the San Diego Audubon Society website at www.sandiegoaudubon.org. For more information, contact the San Diego Audubon office (858 273-7800) or email Mel Hinton at melhinton@sbcglobal.net.

Parts List for Solar Birdbath

All of the parts listed were purchased in the San Diego area. The only item that may not be available in other locations is the 14" saucer. However, any sturdy, plastic saucer that is at least 1 ½" deep and fits flush over a 5-gallon bucket will work.

| Item | Source | Price |
|---|--|--------------------------|
| Solar collector & pump – Aquajet fountain kit (SKU-11-1068) | Silicon Solar Inc. (www.siliconsolar.com) | \$45 (includes shipping) |
| 14" polyethylene saucer (terracotta colored) | Canyon Pottery (858-279-2600) | \$17 |
| Danco Kitchen Spray Hose Guide | Home Depot | \$4.00 |
| 2, 5-gallon buckets lid for bucket (optional) | Home Depot | \$6 (\$3 each) \$ 1 |
| Miscellaneous parts: | | |
| 3 feet 3/8" O.D. x 1/4" I. D. vinyl tubing | Ace Hardware/ Home Depot | varies |
| 3 feet 1/4" O.D. copper tubing | Ace Hardware/ Home Depot | varies |
| 1 1/2" Sink strainer | Ace Hardware/ Home Depot | \$3 |
| Misc. screws, clamps, cable ties | Ace Hardware/ Home Depot | varies |
| Estimated Total: | | \$85 |