

CARING FOR YOUR NEW CANARY

By Jennifer Pittenger

Congratulations! Whether this is your first bird or your latest addition, there are a few things you should know to help your canary live a long and healthy life.

Canaries, prized for their beautiful song and lovely colors, are a type of finch, and are soft billed. Although males are most often the singers, occasionally a hen will do a little singing. Except under rare circumstances, plumage is not an indication of gender; generally, if the bird sings it is considered a male, or singer; if it merely “tweets” and “peeps” it’s considered a female, or hen.

A BIT OF HISTORY

Canaries originally came from a group of islands west of Africa known as the Canary Islands. The islands were inhabited by fierce wild dogs (Canis) for which the Romans named them. The wild canary first captured the attention of the Spaniards during their invasion of the islands in 1473. The little green/brown birds soon became popular with the soldiers and sailors because they were quickly tamed, they became well adjusted to their cages and the males sang irresistible, cheerful songs. The Spanish soldiers and sailors often took these birds back to Spain as souvenirs for their own enjoyment and as gifts for their lady friends. This practice became so popular that the birds were nicknamed “little sugar birds.” As the Spaniards recognized demand for these little sugar birds, they began exporting them. Over the past 500 years, careful selective breeding has provided the world with many beautiful colors and types of canaries.

CHOOSE YOUR FANCY

Canaries are grouped into three basic categories.

1. Type (body size and shape, and stance: Border, Fife, Gloster, Norwich, Frill, and Yorkshire)
2. Color (green, blue [white/black], yellow, orange, red, brown, gray, and various combinations)
3. Song (Roller, Waterslager, American Singer, Timbrado, and Chopper)

A Fourth type should probably be recognized: the “mixed breed” or “Kitchen Canary”. Although they won’t win any prizes at canary shows, these colorful little gems make wonderful pets and often have a hearty and varied song.

THIS MAN IS AN ISLAND

Male canaries are very territorial, and two males should never be kept in a cage together. Two males in a cage is a recipe for disaster! Surprising as it may seem, your little songster will not be lonely without feathered friends, so long as you remember that you are his flock. He wants to be your friend, so talk to him, play music for him, let him watch TV with you, and treat him to the canary’s all-time favorite sound: your vacuum cleaner.

If you must leave him alone for long stretches of time, be kind enough to leave him with a radio or some other audible entertainment. Remember that his ancestors lived in the wild, where a quiet jungle or forest means only one thing: danger. He will feel more secure if his daytime environment has a little bit of “noise”.

If you have your heart set on a pretty flock of canaries, consider a few hens, or perhaps one singer and some hens. Although three or more males may be housed together, they probably won't sing, or only the "top bird" will sing. The male sings for two basic purposes—to flirt with lady birds and to claim his territory. Usually, he must feel like his space is his own for his song to be in top form. Also, if he is surrounded by ladies, well, he's already won, hasn't he? If you must have the pretty flock and the song, and he simply won't oblige, consider putting him in a separate cage. But please don't make him share it with a parakeet—he's liable to get his toes bit off.

CHOOSE YOUR FEATHERED FRIEND CAREFULLY

A well cared for, healthy canary can have a lifespan of ten to fifteen years. To ensure that your relationship gets off to a good start, first consider whether you want a bright, beautiful song to cheer your home (male), or a sweet little tweeter who won't wake you up at the crack of dawn (female).

Look for an active bird with bright eyes, and well groomed, smooth plumage. Avoid a bird that has a crusty-looking beak or feet, or seems to be struggling to breathe (these things can signal a mite infestation). A bird that looks puffy or sleepy (unless it is sleeping!) probably isn't a healthy bird, and can only bring you heartache. Check for a leg band so that you know who the breeder is and the age of the bird. If you are purchasing a singer, make sure that he comes with a guarantee to sing. A good breeder should work with you to bring him into song, or, if "he" lays an egg (oops!) work things out with you to your mutual satisfaction.

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

To make the move to your home as easy as possible, get the cage ready before you bring your bird home. If the cage has been used previously, thoroughly clean and disinfect everything nonporous and replace porous items such as wooden perches and cuttlebone. The bigger the cage the better, and it should be wide rather than tall, since canaries like to fly back and forth. Round cages should be avoided; they're confusing to canaries and can make your bird neurotic. A good tactic for keeping the cage clean is to layer a week's worth (7 layers) of newspaper or paper towels on the cage bottom. Remove 1 layer each day, and completely clean and disinfect the cage once each week.

Perches should be of varying size, and can be plastic, wooden dowels, or natural branches. If natural branches are used, make sure the wood is non-toxic, and avoid especially cherry, yew, and cedar. Good choices are alder, aspen, apple, willow, and manzanita. Make sure you remove all of the buds and leaves and wash and dry the branches thoroughly before putting them in the cage, and avoid branches that have been sprayed with pesticides. Sandpaper perches should never be used; they can give your canary sores on its feet.

A cuttlebone in the cage is a necessity. Cuttlebone provides your canary with important nutrients such as calcium and iodine, and helps to keep the beak in good condition.

Provide for fresh seed and water each day. Consider a hooded seed cup; every canary knows that the best seeds are always on the bottom of the pile, and will happily send all of the rest flying across the room to get to them.

Similarly, an open water dish is an invitation for a bath/shower. Unless you enjoy changing your bird's water 2-3 times each day, and don't mind having the cage's surroundings splashed, consider a water bottle with a ball point tube. A good choice is the 8 oz. "Lixit 450 Wide Mouth Water Bottle"

which is durable and easy to clean.

The location of your canary's cage will directly affect his health and happiness. By a sunny window is best, as long as there is always a sizable shaded region within the cage. Full spectrum lighting will help keep your bird healthy. Cage height should be between your head and waist, low enough for you to interact well with him, but high enough to help him feel in control and secure. If you tower over him, he may feel that you are a predator instead of his friend, and he may be constantly on guard. If your singer isn't singing, his cage may not be high enough.

Canaries enjoy small toys such as beads and bells, and especially swings.

Try threading some pony beads onto the side wire of his swing... he will enjoy pushing them up and down. Avoid mirrors—they look like competition and may keep your singer from singing.

Also avoid rope toys or anything else that could catch small toes or legs, especially key rings.