

Right Bird, Right Birdhouse

by Carol A. Garringer

With their entertaining antics, beautiful songs and appetites for insects, birds are welcome visitors to the garden. By supplying them with seed and suet in the winter and fresh water year-round, many can be enticed to become frequent or even permanent guests in our landscapes. And while many build their own nests of twigs in trees or shrubs, some of our native birds are cavity-nesters, which means they need a hole in a tree for their nests. With the continuing destruction of habitat that's occurring these days, these feathered friends (which include wrens, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, swallows, woodpeckers and bluebirds, among others) can use all the help they can get. A well-designed and constructed birdhouse can encourage these birds to raise their young in your garden.

Now, there's no reason why a functional birdhouse can't also be a fine garden ornament. Some of the houses I've made are quite fanciful, including replicas of log cabins, country churches and Gothic manors. But the primary goal should always be to provide a home that suits the needs of the birds. If it doesn't, then they won't use the house; it's as simple as that.

To learn which cavity-nesting species live in your area, contact your local Audubon Society, or buy a bird identification guide. Pay attention to what the book says about the habitats preferred by the birds you want to attract. There's no sense in putting up a bluebird house in the middle of a city, but if your garden is adjacent to open fields or meadows, go for it.

There are some features you should always look for when buying a quality birdhouse for your garden. (I've not included information on the larger cavity-nesters here, such as owls or wood ducks, as they live in habitats very different from the city/suburban environment many of us live in.) The following points are based on my personal experience, with additional information from the sources listed at the end of this article.

Building Materials/Finishes/Fasteners: Pressure-treated wood should never be used for birdhouses, as the chemicals it is treated with are toxic to birds. For a long-lasting birdhouse, I prefer to use redwood or cedar; exterior grade plywood is also acceptable. The wood on the inside of the house should be rough, so the baby birds can get a grip when they are ready to leave the nest. If the exterior is painted, water-based latex is preferable to oil-based stains paints or stains, and the unit should be aired out for at least two weeks before it is hung up for occupancy. All fasteners, such as nails and screws, should be corrosion-resistant, such as galvanized steel, brass or stainless steel.

Entry Size: The first thing I notice about many birdhouses I see on the market is that the entry holes aren't right. (Of course, if you don't mind having house sparrows or starlings take up residence, then entry size doesn't matter. More about these two birds later.) Sometimes I see bumblebee-sized entry holes, or huge ones a barn owl might use. The

fact is, specific birds use specific-sized openings. The smallest wrens use a 1" hole; the larger wrens and chickadees will use a 1 1/8". A nuthatch or titmouse wants an entry that's 1 1/4" in diameter. Most swallows and bluebirds like one that is 1 1/2", while most woodpeckers prefer a 2", and so on. While many will nest in houses with entries that are larger than needed, there's no way they can squeeze their bodies through one that is too small, and so they will have no interest in the house. The tag on a purchased birdhouse should indicate the entry size or which birds will use it.

Now, about those house sparrows and starlings. Some consider them to be "weed" birds of the garden. They're alien species (the house sparrow, also known as the English sparrow, is actually a weaver finch from Africa) that were introduced to New York in the 1800s and rapidly spread across the continent. Both are aggressive and reproduce quickly, raising two or three broods per year. Because they crowd out and harass many of our native birds, maybe you'll agree that these two really don't need any extra help. (While they both have a place in the natural world, so do rats and houseflies, and you won't find me building any homes for them, either...)

So when buying a birdhouse, keep in mind that house sparrows can fit through a 1 1/2" entry, while starlings can get into a house with a 2" hole. If you buy a house for a bird that needs one of these larger entry holes, you'll need to watch for nesting activity from these unwanted guests, and remove their eggs/nesting materials to discourage them.

Dimensions: There are some general guidelines for interior birdhouse dimensions listed in most birding books and websites, but they vary somewhat. In nature, birds are adaptable, and will nest in cavities or houses that are either smaller or larger than those on the suggested lists, as long as they can get through the entry. Most of the native birds mentioned in this article prefer interior compartments 4", 5" or 6" square and 6" to 15" in height, with the smallest birds using the smaller dimensions and the taller, wider houses preferred by the large birds. (Sometimes when I make a custom birdhouse, like a replica of a client's home, I build partitions inside the house so that the final interior measurements are those preferred by the bird we are trying to attract.) The location of the entry (distance above the floor) can also be important. Again, the tag on a quality birdhouse should indicate which bird that house is designed for.

Vents/Drainage: All birdhouses need air vents somewhere under the roof eaves for cross ventilation, and holes in the floor to allow rain water to drain.

Clean Out Panel: A side, back or roof section should be removable for cleaning out the house at season's end.

Perches: They're not necessary. In fact, I've never put one on any of the hundreds of birdhouses I've built. Cavity-nesting birds don't have a perch under their tree hole in the woods, so they don't need one on a birdhouse. Perches allow birds such as house sparrows or starlings to land and use the house, or predators (like blue jays or even squirrels) to harass the native birds already in residence. Do the desirable birds a favor,

and don't buy a birdhouse with a perch, or remove it before you put the house in the garden.

By learning about the specific needs of the birds you wish to attract and then buying houses that suit them, you will greatly increase your chances that our native birds will nest in your garden's birdhouses for years to come.

Sources: *The Original Birdhouse Book* (Don McNeil, Birdwatcher's Digest, 1991) and *Familiar Birds of the Northwest* (Harry Nehls, Audubon Society of Portland, 1981)

This article was first printed in *The Hardy Plant*, April/May, 2002. Revised 2008.