

Attracting bats keeps your garden healthy

Question: I would like to attract bats to my garden to help control insects. Can you give me some ideas of how to do that?

Answer: Attracting bats to your garden is an excellent idea! These flying mammals are the primary consumer of nighttime flying insects such as mosquitoes, rootworms, cucumber beetles, stink bugs, leafhoppers, cutworms and corn earworm moths. They can consume as much as a third of their weight in flying insects every 30 minutes.

Bats hibernate in the winter, but come spring, they will be looking for places to roost and have their broods in spring, so winter is the best time to provide them with bat boxes. Normally, bats seek shelter in hollow trees and caves, but may also roost during the day in attics, behind window shutters and even storm drains. They group together with a few bats or up to several hundred.

Bats are nocturnal and navigate by echolocation to pursue their prey. They are no more susceptible to getting rabies as any other mammal, but should you observe a bat acting oddly and crawling on the ground, it could have rabies or some other disease. Never pick up a bat, but only handle with gloves if necessary.

With bats losing their habitat due to encroaching human populations, wind energy development, disease and decreasing water and foraging



Bonnie Courter
Ask a Master Gardener

resources, they are declining in numbers. Providing them with bat houses should help encourage their populations. Bat boxes resemble large birdhouses but are open on the bottom and partitioned into several narrow spaces. For plans to construct one, check out the University of Maryland Extension's resources on bats.

Attracting bats isn't easy because they are quite finicky about their shelter requirements. Location, size and color are all factors to consider.

Location: Choose an open location for your bat house to offer protection from predators and keeping temperature more constant. Bats prefer interior temperatures between 80-100 degrees during the summer. The house should receive five to seven hours of direct sunlight.

Hang the box 12-15 feet above the ground and attach it to a freestanding pole made of a pressure-treated 4- by 6-inch post or metal pole, anchored with concrete at the base for support. Attaching a conical piece of flashing wrapped around the pole will protect from predators. The box can also be mounted on the side of a barn or other structure as

long as it is the proper height and gets the required amount of sunlight.

Your bat house should be located at least 1/4 mile from water. The size of the water body is not a significant factor.

Because guano (droppings) will build up beneath the bat house, choose a remote location as the odor can be bothersome. Guano can be added to the compost pile or as an excellent plant fertilizer. Always wear gloves and collect it with a shovel or scoop for protection against microorganisms living in the feces.

Size: The larger the box, the more bats may fit inside. About 300 bats can inhabit a box 36-inches high by 24-inches wide by 10-inches deep. Larger boxes are more effective as they provide space for breeding females and their pups. Check with our local Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife office where you often can obtain free bat boxes made by volunteers or learn to make your own.

Color: Darker exterior colors such as dark brown or dark grey will keep more heat in the box in spring, but may be too hot in the summer. So consider providing two houses back to back, one painted darker than the other. Bats will crawl into the other house to regulate their temperature.

Placing a bat box in your yard can be a fun way to provide habitat for these beneficial creatures, and watching bats come out at dusk, dive-bombing their insect prey, is quite a treat as well.