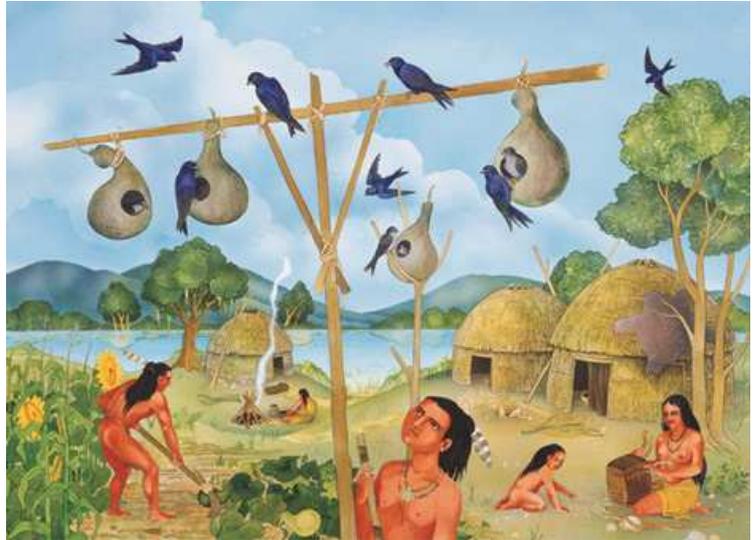


Attracting Purple Martins to Eat Garden Pests

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Did you know that over one million North Americans put up housing for purple martins? Unfortunately, many people are unable to successfully attract breeding martins. This article will shed some light on why that may be happening and what you can do about it.



Purple martins are one of the most popular members of the swallow

family. They have very short, flat, triangular bills, large mouths, extremely long wings, V-shaped tails, and weak legs. The males are dark metallic blue and the females and juveniles are blue-brown with a whitish belly.

Martins begin arriving in Florida around late January and early February and begin their flight to Brazil as early as late June. They may be good near your garden since they eat flying insects like beetles and may control those pests. Once established, they often keep nuisance birds away as well. One myth is that they eat tons of mosquitoes, but it is actually only a very small part of their diet. They catch food while on the move so you won't see them nibbling caterpillars or aphids away.

You may have seen gourd houses or boxes way up in the air around the neighborhood for the purple martins. Due to a natural housing shortage of tree cavities to nest in, martins have adapted to nest in gourds originally put out for their use by Native Americans and later specially designed houses.

There are a variety of house designs out there on the internet for martins or you can buy a wooden or plastic house already made. The most important aspects of successful houses include the size of each compartment, the size and placement of the entrance holes, and good ventilation. Martins also prefer white houses since it reflects the heat of

the sun, keeping the babies cooler. It also makes it easier for them to see the entrance hole.

Since it is the fall, you may want to try your hand at creating a gourd house or several since martins like to nest in colonies. It can't be any old gourd. It needs to be at least 9 inches in diameter and dried out for several months before you can start carving into it. Some people sell them already dried out.

Before you even have your house, you need to check to see if your location is appropriate for martins since this is the number one reason why houses fail. The houses need to be placed in the most open spot available with a direct flight path to their house and only 30-120 feet from human housing. We are their guardians and they know that. There should not be any trees taller than the martin housing within 40-60 feet. If you don't have an ideal location, the martins simply will not come.

The housing should be 10-20 feet high without any vines or shrubs below. It is best to place it on a pole or device that you can retract up and down so that you can check the nest weekly for issues and remove the house or block the holes in between seasons.

For new landlords, the housing should be in place about a month after you see the purple martin "scouts," about mid-February. For houses that have been previously occupied, they can be opened when you start seeing martins. If you are late, your resident martins will let you know it. It is important to always keep the holes of the house in the same direction year after year after occupancy.

Competition and predation are major issues for martins, so continual monitoring is important. If another bird occupies the house, the martins will abandon it. The houses should be closed up (paper cups in holes) or removed during the off-season. For predation, the house should not have any wires to trees allowing squirrels to get to them and pole-guards attached.

For more ways to attract and manage purple martins, you can find information at www.purplemartin.org. You can also find information on purple martins and a basic house plan on <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw092>.