

# Know how to help feathered friends

By Debbie Wallis Landau  
special writer

Providing food and shelter for the feathered friends who frequent your property has an appeal for people of all ages.

Whether you're an avid naturalist or simply enjoy the prospect of making birds more comfortable, many local resources can get you started.

Raspberry and blackberry bushes provide excellent cover, nesting sites and food sources for 146 different kinds of birds. Blackberry and mulberry bushes offer fruits appealing to many members of the thrush family, including robins and eastern bluebirds as well as other species.

Through early spring, birds need high-calorie foods to keep their body temperatures at 106 degrees. Oil-type sunflower, suet and thistle seed are the highest calorie foods, said Marj Ferguson, owner of Wild Birds Unlimited in Farmington Hills.

Her store not only carries books on attracting birds, but also provides food storage through different seasons, birdhouses, a newsletter, wild-life calendars and gift items.

A nationwide artistic explosion marks the craft of birdhouse design. Lovely and whimsical though many are, many houses make great collectors' items or home decor, but aren't suitable for outside birds.

PAMELA BIGLEY, owner of Bird's Eye View and Nature Center in Rochester, advises people considering buying or building birdhouses to evaluate your habitat.

"You need to consider your property and learn about the birds common to the area. Birds most likely to use manmade houses include wrens, chickadees, bluebirds and purple martins. While wrens and chickadees are more plentiful around wooded areas, bluebirds prefer open fields and purple martins like open areas near water."

Bigley, a wildlife biologist by education, opened Bird's Eye View and Nature Center in 1983 with her mother, Barbara, a former science teacher.

"I enjoy helping teachers use the outdoors as a classroom. When I got out of school in the 1970s, there wasn't a great demand for naturalists," said Bigley, outreach liaison to Dinosaur Hill Nature Preserve in Rochester.

"When people are serious about erecting a birdhouse, they need to make sure it's species correct," Bigley said. "Those features include the correct size opening, the diameter of the cavity of the house and the distance from the opening to the floor."

"The opening of a house for a wren or chickadee is only 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 inches. They're tiny birds. The eastern bluebird needs a slightly larger opening, but the purple martin needs a hole 2 1/2 inches wide."

THE PURPLE martin is the only bird in North America reliant on manmade housing.

Purple martins live in large communities, are the largest member of the swallow family and eat insects caught in flight. Nesting near open space close to water, their homes are often called "condominiums" because of the compartments and openings.

Houses built from aluminum are most practical because they're easier to clean and better ventilated. Their homes, being so large, are almost always situated on telescopic poles, which permit lowering for cleaning.

Bigley observes that only 15 percent of the birds who live in North America use the cavity of a birdhouse.

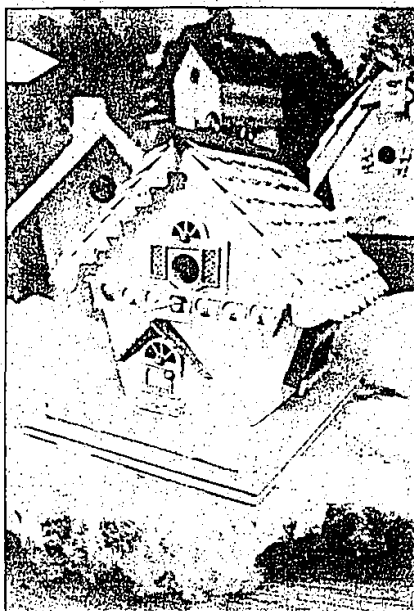
"Many more set up their own nests in natural habitats," she said. "If you're serious about creating housing, make sure you're committed to keeping it cleaned out after each brood has left so parasites don't remain in the cavity of the house."

"Make sure the birdhouse roof protects the entrance from water and mount the house at the proper height, the merchants add."

BIGLEY is excited about the return of many eastern bluebirds to Michigan, a project jointly encouraged by the Department of Natural Resources and the Michigan United Conservation Clubs.

"In the 1870s," she said, "the bluebird population was at its peak. They were as plentiful as robins. Then they gradually almost disappeared. They're migratory birds, who are members of the thrush family and they return early and will nest in boxes if they're available."

Small shrubs and trees near open fields attract them. The biggest challenge is keeping out starlings and



Michiganian Jack Burns' birdhouses often resemble a cross between a chalet and a gingerbread house.

sparrows. Cleaning nesting material helps cut down on their invasions. Bluebird boxes should be mounted in open areas, along fence rows, golf courses, Bigley said.

Mary Teets, owner with husband, Donald, of Backyard Birds in Farmington, mentions the Bluebird Trail in Farmington Hills Heritage Park as a project many of her customers have participated in.

Her store, in addition to a sampling of species correct houses and a

variety of food and feeders, displays a library of books and kits for sale as well as tapes and other materials to rent.

TEETS REGULARLY teaches a class called "Backyard Birds" for Farmington Community Education. Livonia resident Charlie Schlemmer met Teets at a bird breeder's exhibition. He raises zebra finches and canaries but is an avid backyard feeder. He says his yard is visited mostly by chickadees and sometimes

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Bird's Eye View and Nature Center

tinuous, who will come up to him and eat thistle seed from his hand.

When customers ask advice on house materials, Teets says: "Rough-hewn cedar works well. It's durable and doesn't have to be pre-treated."

Among newer designs of hand-crafted houses the Teets carry are works by Jack Burns, who lives in Kawkawin. His signature pieces often resemble a cross between a chalet and a gingerbread house.

The Country Originals line employs woods and metals in birdhouse construction. The designs, according to Teets, are artsy, but utilitarian. Many are shaped like apples, watermelons or pumpkins.

FERGUSON SHOWCASES birdhouses in Michigan's state colors and University of Michigan colors. They're made of pine, then painted. Customers can't fail to notice the large white aluminum purple martin condominium, which dwarfs all the rest.

Ferguson knows many local artists who will design custom birdhouses for her customers.

Like Bigley, Ferguson and Teets emphasize the benefits of working with children.

"If they live with nature when they're young, they grow up respecting nature and animals. Bird feeding, especially, is a hands-on activity for young kids," Teets said.

All the stores, including Backyard Birds, offer host school field trips, where the students have built paper mache birds and made nests. They enjoy looking through the swing

arms and shepherds crooks sold, to make reaching and moving backyard equipment easier, especially for short arms.

ABOUT BAT houses, Teets said, "It's a growing trend to put them up, and the DNR is stressing how beneficial they are to insect control. They're terrific for getting rid of mosquitoes."

"With environmental issues getting more support, people are being discouraged from using chemicals whenever they can. Bats and other birds remove the need for pesticides. Bats like a water source and an area with plentiful insects."

All three stores have a generous selection of bird-feeders. Bigley says the price range for birdhouses are \$150 to \$150, but you can find a good, durable one in the \$15-\$35 range.

In her opinion, feeders crafted from polycarbonate are great and durable. "Squirrels can't chew on them. The material is called, I guess, and it lasts five or six times as long as other materials do."

All three stores sell baffles — a shield object to deflect scavengers from feeders — in varying shapes and prices.

It's a misconception that birds will starve if you don't feed them, says Bigley. "Chickadees studied showed that when the weather dropped below 10 degrees, they needed a ready source of food so they didn't have to use their own energy. But the study revealed they only ate at feeders 25 percent of the time."

## English gardens

'There are as many variations as there are people'

By Cathleen Collins Lee  
special writer

FOR MANY of us, having a garden in the back yard means creating some tidy borders around the outside edges; the center is simply a large expanse of lawn. But, influenced by her English father, Barb Wright of Troy has taken a different and attractive approach.

While there are indeed shrubs and plants growing around the perimeter, Wright has developed several curved, irregularly shaped islands of flowers and shrubs throughout her yard. These flower beds are raised mounds, often lined by rocks and connected by brick pathways. In the center of one is even a small pond.

The beds are dominated by a few deciduous or evergreen shrubs, including hydrangea, which gets deep rose blossoms, rhododendrons, azaleas, euonymus and yews. The shrubs are accompanied by a procession of perennials throughout the summer: day lilies, sedum (a flowering groundcover), ferns, hostas, violas and white, pink and lilac astilbe.

WRIGHT HAS created her yard to resemble the English garden her father grew when she was growing up in Ferndale. But there are few hard and fast rules about what an English garden is.

"There are as many variations as there are people," says Steven Sky, owner of Lakeland Landscape in Plymouth. "Some are very manicured, with uniform shapes, while some are more natural, like a garden at a country home. English gardens do have a few common

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— Barb Wright  
English-garden buff

characteristics, however. Generally they are enclosed in some way, often by a stone or brick wall or by a hedge. Islands of flowers and shrubs are scattered throughout the yard, sometimes in geometric shapes, and sometimes in more informal, irregular ones like Wright's.

And English gardens make good use of perennials so that something is blooming all season long. Often flowers are grouped by color and the color combinations can be lovely.

DAVID MICHENER, assistant curator at Matthaei Botanical Gardens in Ann Arbor, says it would be impossible to duplicate an English garden because England's climate is so different from ours.

"They don't have the long hot summers and cold winters we do," he said. "It shifts the blooming periods and they can get plant combinations we don't get. A paint-by-numbers equivalent doesn't work. But what people can do is make gardens that are in the spirit of an English garden."

That's exactly what Wright, a piano teacher, with two grown sons, has tried to do. She loves to

garden because it offers her the freedom to create something that is beautiful to her.

"I can spend eight hours in the yard and hate to come in," she said. "I love it because I can do it the way I want to. And it's mine. My husband, Jack, helps me, but it really is mine."

The hedges that often enclose English gardens can be time-consuming to maintain. In Wright's yard, dogwood bushes, vines, lilacs, forsythia, wild rose bushes and shrubs planted along the fence fill in and enclose the yard in the summer. THERE ARE many small gardens scattered throughout Wright's yard, each with its own character. An area near the side of the house that gets a lot of sun is planted with lilacs, daisies, Japanese irises and ivy.

A tree behind the house is surrounded by a blanket of groundcover, interspersed with coltsfoot, low spreading yews and junipers, primroses and astilbe. And in the back corner, Wright's husband built a wooden archway called a pergola, which blooms in mid-summer with a clematis vine.

Loren Blum, a horticulturist at English Gardens in West Bloomfield, points out that the perennials so important to an English garden are much more available in this country than they used to be.

"There's been a tremendous increase in the use of perennials in the past 10 to 15 years, due to the influence of the Europeans," he said. "Perennials give you color for a period of time — three to six weeks — and give you a changing scene."

"Most need to be replanted every two to four years, depending on the type of plant, but it's probably less work than obtaining all those annuals."



Day lilies are among the easy-to-grow perennials Barb Wright uses in her English-style garden.

## Soil nutrient balance — a key to healthy growth

By Keely Wygonik  
staff writer

Put your soil to the test to see if it has the necessary nutrients to make your lawn and garden thrive.

"Soil testing is a diagnostic lab test that determines the nutrients in the soil," said Greg Patichan, horticultural agent for the Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service, Oakland County office. "You can't tell how you should fertilize soil by looking at it. The tests will tell you."

One way to judge your soil's chemical composition is to test its pH. The pH describes its alkalinity (sweetness) or acidity (sourness) as measured on a scale of one to 14 with seven representing neutral.

Some plants thrive only in intensely acid soil. Others survive in alkaline soils. Lime is generally used to raise pH and sul-

phur to lower it, too much or not enough can lead to problems.

If your soil is well balanced, fertilizers will work correctly and plants will thrive. A balance of the three major plant nutrients — nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium or potash — is necessary for good soil.

When you shop for fertilizer, you'll see that the bags are labeled with three-number formulas, such as 5-10-10 or 10-10-0. This is how the percentage of the three major elements within a given fertilizer mix is indicated.

Nitrogen makes leaves green. Abundant nitrogen results in dark green foliage. Too much can cause rapid growth and weak plants. A plant in this kind of soil is less resistant to disease, infection and injury. Stunted plant growth, a slow-down in development and yellowing leaves signal a nitrogen deficiency.

To boost the nitrogen content, condition your soil with a mixture of organic material which includes aged manure.

Some vegetables like asparagus, cabbage, leek, chard and Brussels sprouts benefit from extra nitrogen. For a lush, healthy lawn, nitrogen is important.

Phosphorus makes fruits and flowers grow. To add phosphorus, rake bone meal into soil. Potassium makes roots grow and aids plants in forming starches and sugars. It also helps them resist disease and drought. It is the third major element in the fertilizer formula. Wood ashes are a good source of potassium for your soil.

But how much is enough? You won't know until you test the soil. There are two ways — you can send a soil sample to Michigan State University for testing, or buy a kit from a home and garden store.

Kits are available at Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service offices for \$7.50 or \$8.50 by mail. Kits consist of instructions and a small cardboard box for the soil sample. The soil is sent to Michigan State University and analyzed in the soil testing lab. An interpretation of soil test results and the fertilizer recommendations will accompany your soil test report.

You can also test soil at home with kits sold at garden centers like the "Acu-Test" by Sudbury which tests pH and nitrogen, cost \$1.99. Sudbury also makes a Lawn and Garden Soil Test Kit, cost \$14.99 that tests lime, nitrogen phosphorus and potash levels.

After learning the proper mix of fertilizer, it's time to get ready for gardening.

To prepare the soil, clear the garden of cans, sticks, rocks and any other trash. Pick up a handful of soil. Squeeze it. If the soil falls into pieces it is dry enough to dig. If it

stays in a mud ball it is too wet.

When the soil is dry enough, spread half the fertilizer and organic matter like leaves, straw, grass clippings, over the garden surface, then dig in and turn over the soil to a depth of eight inches.

Apply the other half of the fertilizer and organic matter. Work these into the soil and rake until smooth and free of large clumps. Continue raking into the soil until it is smooth and ready for planting.

Compost, or decomposed organic material, is a good all-around soil booster. It helps dry, sandy soils to hold water longer and looses hard, wet clay soil.

You can make compost by collecting leaves, straw, grass clippings, vegetable peelings into a pile.

Alternate layers of compost with layers of fertilizer, about three cups for each bushel of compost.