

Purple Martin and other Birdhouses

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Even if you did not receive a purple martin house as a Christmas present, you may want to consider putting one or more in your landscape. We used to justify attracting martins because we credited them with eating buckets and buckets of mosquitoes, unfortunately researchers say purple martins are more likely to eat high-flying butterflies and dragonflies than mosquitoes. Nevertheless, martins are a great addition to the landscape. Their friendly chatter and sweeping flight patterns are complemented by the drama of their rivalries with English sparrows, the visibility of their family life, and loyalty to the birdhouses that they return to each year. The landscape becomes a more interesting place.

Your landscape will make a suitable site for a martin house even if you have trees if there are open places to raise a pole and house up 15 feet and the martins have some lanes of open air that they can fly from the birdhouse to the sky and open lawn or water areas. I know the mix of trees and open area works because that describes my landscape and for a number of years we have added houses, and much to our delight, the number of purple martins that nest has increased.

Purple martin houses can be works of art, but I have the best luck with aluminum kits that are easy to assemble and mount on a pole built for the job. It is important that the house and pole assembly allow you to lower the house every August when the purple martins and their fledged young leave for assembly points, and eventually to migrate to South America for the winter. Clean out the house and close the entry holes with the provided plastic stops so the sparrows won't raise more young and fill up the vacant birdhouse. I raise my houses each spring on or about March 1 unless I see martins visiting the yard before then.

In addition to the ability to raise and lower the house, the dimensions of the individual cabins and the entry holes are important. Attracting Birds to Southern Gardens by Pope, Odenwald, and Fryling is my favorite reference. For information on specifications for purple martin housing systems obtain a resource book like The Backyard Birdhouse Book by Rene and Christyna Laubach. Another good source of information and manufactured houses are the Birds Unlimited Stores in San Antonio. Purple martin houses can also be purchased on the internet or at selected feed and pet stores.

Buy a bag of concrete mix to set the pole boot in the ground. Use a level to make sure the base of the pole is straight. After 2 days of curing the house can be placed on the pole.

Purple martin houses are the most obvious but other birdhouses can be placed in the landscape with a reasonable chance of success. Bluebird houses are available everywhere. Their specifications are based on years of science and success but unfortunately it is rare for a bluebird to nest in San Antonio. If you live a few miles outside of the City towards the Hill Country, New Braunfels, or Seguin there is a good chance you could host bluebirds in houses with the right sized dimensions and entry hole. In the City you are more likely to host English sparrows, starlings, Carolina chickadees, or black-crested titmice.

House wrens move through San Antonio during migration, but we are more likely to attract Bewicks or Carolina wrens to a house with an entry hole that is 1.25 inches in diameter rather than the one-inch house wren hole.

Other birds that can be attracted to birdhouses in the San Antonio area include woodpeckers, barn owls, flycatchers, screech owls, house finches, and tree ducks. Now is the time to place your birdhouses for spring use. Confer with one of the resources listed and see what you can attract.