

If your customers are coming to you looking for answers to a mosquito problem, it's beneficial for you to market yourself as knowledgeable about one effective solution: bats.

By Mel Toellner

A NATURAL SOLUTION FOR **BATTLING** MOSQUITOES



In the garden center world you've all seen the trend toward "natural" pest solutions.

With the recent new awareness of the risks of diseases that are carried by mosquitoes like the Zika virus, many consumers are asking questions about mosquito control and looking for the best "natural" solutions.

The solution could cause you to go "batty." Did you realize one insect-consuming bat consumes about 2,000 to 6,000 insects every night?

While Purple Martins get most of the press as mosquito eaters, the truth is bats are much better as they patrol the air at night when mosquitoes are out.

One solution to help your customers in their battle against mosquitoes is to sell bat houses. Putting up a bat house (houses) is a great natural way to help them solve this problem.

I personally use the Organization for Bat Conservation bat houses because they have the highest proven occupancy of any I have tried.

With ever increasing habitat loss, it's getting harder for bats to find a safe place to raise their young and roost during the day.

By providing a bat house you give females a warm safe place to raise their young. Bats normally raise only one young (pup) each year. It's critical they find safe roosting spots.



Getting Customers Started

Bat houses should be attached at least 15 feet high, free from obstructions with at least 20 feet of open space, and facing southeast to gain exposure to sunlight.

Different bat species in the U.S. prefer various roosting temperatures. Some bats prefer their bat house to be in full sun, while others prefer partial sun, and yet another species will be attracted to houses placed in the shade.

The placement of a bat house plays a major role in the internal temperature. Attach a house to structures such as poles, sides of buildings or tall trees without obstructions.

The area under the bat house should be clear, allowing the bats to fly in and out. Houses placed on poles and structures tend to become occupied quicker than houses placed on trees.

Bats return from migration and awaken from hibernation as early as March in most of the U.S., but stay active year-round in extreme southern areas of the U.S.

Bats will be abundant throughout the summer and into early fall if houses are properly placed.

Approximately half of all bat houses are occupied within the first summer and up to 80 percent are occupied within the first two to three years.

If bats do not roost in a house by the end of the third summer, the house should be moved to a different location.

It is also helpful to attach more than one bat house in a yard to provide bats with different housing options and increase the chances of having an occupied bat house.

Bats that commonly use bat houses in the U.S. are Big Brown Bat (*Eptesicus fuscus*), Evening Bat (*Nycticeius humeralis*), Mexican Free-Tailed Bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*), Southeastern Bat (*Myotis austroriparius*) and Tri-colored Bat (*Perimyotis subflavus*).

Bat houses can be put up any time of the year; however, it is best when putting up a new bat house to have it up before the start of spring.

In colder regions, bats return from hibernation and migration in the spring, looking for a place to roost and have their young. It's best not to delay the attachment of your bat house as their other roosts may become unavailable anytime of the year, requiring them to search out a new home.

Any bat house will be a potential location. If customers are doing a bat exclusion from their

homes, I recommend putting up a bat house before the exclusion. This allows the bats to have a place to go after they are evicted from a home.

The location, temperature and design are the key factors in bat house occupancy. There is no scent or item that can be placed in or around a bat house to attract bats.

After Inhabitation

There are three primary ways to determine if a bat house is inhabited: Simply observe the bat house at dusk to see if bats exit; look for bat guano under the entrance of the house; and if possible, also look into the house with a flashlight to see if it is inhabited.

Don't try to reach into the house. If the bat house is not in an optimal location or has a poor design, you are less likely to have bats living in a house. Sometimes it can take over a year until bats decide to roost in a bat house.

How do your customers protect bats in the house from predators?

Bat houses have a predator guard to keep out most cats and raccoons; however, their narrow paws may be able to reach in and grab a bat from a full bat house.

My first recommendation is to not put your bat house on a tree. Trees are easy for snakes and cats to climb. If a bat house is put on a tree, attach a metal shield around the trunk of the tree.

The metal piece should be around 2 feet wide and be placed high enough so raccoons and

cats can't just simply jump over it, the higher the better. Make sure to place it at least a few feet away from the bat house to allow the bats to drop and fly out of the house.

Consumers may ask you what to do with a bat house when they move. Should they take it with them?

The best thing is to leave the house in its current location, as bats return to the same roost year after year and are depending on the roost to be there on their return.

In my opinion, the "experts" in information about bats are the following two organizations: Organization For Bat Conservation (www.batconservation.org) and Bat Conservation International (www.batcon.org).

Most of the information I share in this article comes from personal experiences and what I've learned from these two great organizations. I recommend you reach out to them and check out my personal website www.birdmanmel.com for questions your staff and consumers have.

As consumers turn to you for natural mosquito control, remember to recommend putting up a bat house. Bats are natural mosquito eaters! **LGR**

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► Help your customers control mosquitoes during the night by discussing bat houses. A single bat can consume 2,000 to 6,000 insects in one night.

