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Bats in your garden can actually be beneficial

By **Kevina Vulinec**
Delaware State University

Garden Tales

Bat sites

To find out more about bats, see these Web sites:

Bat Conservation International:
<http://www.batcon.org/home/default.asp>

Bat Management and Conservation:
<http://www.batmanagement.com/>

Bat Detectors: <http://www.batbox.com/>

Bat Houses: http://www.eparks.org/wildlife_protection/wildlife_facts/bats/bat_house.asp

However, research on bat foraging in both organic and sprayed crop fields has shown that because pesticides decrease the number of insects, bats will be less active in sprayed crops. Bats are also very sensitive to pesticides, and many of these compounds are sequestered in fat tissue, which bats use as their only energy source through the long winter while they are hibernating.

Most people get the eek effect when they think about bats. These little animals inspire fear and loathing among most people, who, harking back to Dracula, are terrified that they may have their blood imbibed, their hair used as a nest, or be infected by rabies. In contrast to the myths, bats are a most beneficial mammal.

They are the only mammal capable of true flight (and not just gliding, like flying squirrels). They also eat an incredible number of insects, including those that bite us, spread disease, and eat our crops. If you have a garden, you may feel that keeping bats as far away as possible is preferable, but let me attempt to convince you otherwise.

Bats can eat almost their body weight in insects a night. Our bats in Delaware eat mosquitoes (as many as 600 a night) and are happy to chomp down many crop pests, such as June beetles, cucumber beetles, corn earworm, and tobacco budworm.



Delaware State University/Kesha Braunskill
An Eastern Red bat captured in Delaware. People should not handle bats without proper training and vaccination.

Do you want to provide better habitat for bats in your garden? Keep mature trees, especially along a continuous strip. Keep snags, also, and dead bark on trees. Bats really like to snuggle up under loose bark during day roosts. But open patches of gar-

den are important, also, because most bats feed on insects in uncluttered, open habitat areas, rather than in dense woods. Planting certain garden plants may also encourage bat activity.

According to the Web site harvestsafe.com, certain plants

may also attract bats, such as Salvia, Phlox, Cornflowers, Four o'clocks, Moonflower, Nicotiana. These plants have a fragrance that draws moths, which will then attract bats. A water source, such as a birdbath or small pond, is also excellent for bats. Of course, limit your use of pesticides.

And if you really want to encourage bats, think about putting up bat houses to give your local bats additional home space. You can make homemade bat houses, or buy ready-made models. These houses also include guidelines for best placement, such as the orientation to the sun and the distance from tall trees. Some web resources for bat houses are listed below.

Do you have bats around your garden already? To find out, step out at dusk and watch the sky, especially along tree lines. Bats fly differently than birds by flapping rapidly but moving slowly through the air, and foraging is seen in their quick turns and dips as they home in and capture prey.

To really listen in on your bats, buy an inexpensive ultrasonic

detector, that will translate the ultrasonic calls of bats (between 20 and 100 kHz) to frequencies within our hearing range (less than 20 kHz). A little practice with a bat detector, and you will be able to hear when a bat has captured an insect!

Happy batting in the garden!

Editor's note: Dr. Kevina Vulinec is associate professor of wildlife biology in the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Delaware State University. For more information on this story, contact her at (302) 857-6457 or kvulinec@desu.edu.