



NEWS FROM HAVERFIELD PARK

HOME TWEET HOME

By Barbara Caswell



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Spring's coming, and sharp little birds' eyes are skeptically inspecting manmade birdhouses. The plain, practical ones, the traditional ornamental ones (designed more for the human eye), and the really wild art projects.

Other bird magazines may offer terrific scientific detail, but I'm fond of the delightful and sometimes silly publication "Birds and Blooms." It has a regular feature devoted to handmade birdhouses created by their readers, who seem to be mostly retired Americans in the Midwest. What incredible things happen when bird lovers have time on their hands! Birdhouses made to look like trains, gas stations, giant animals . . . birdhouses built of brick or glass . . . this is contemporary folk art at its best, and you would also be amazed at the quality of photography done by ordinary folks in their own gardens.

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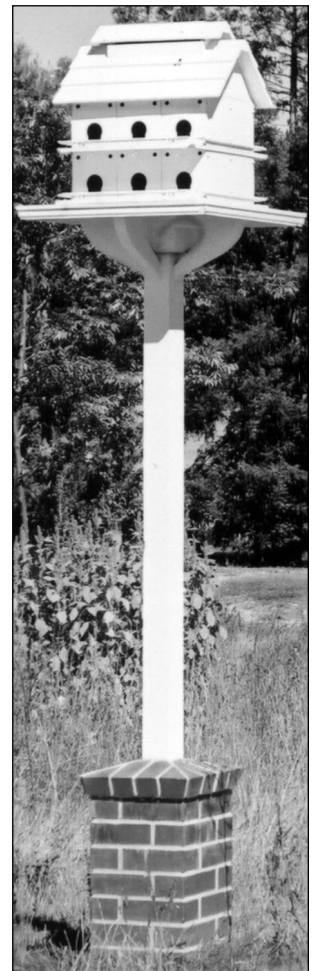
One Christmas, I built a bird-sized model of my husband's grandmother's little stucco cottage for her and carefully roofed it with real asphalt shingles, all cut small. I could have used paper: the birdhouse is so treasured that it has never yet seen the light of day, as she keeps it in her living room for guests to see. I guess it's just provided another kind of enjoyment than the one I had in mind!

Later, we sent a photo of Nonni and her birdhouse to "Birds and Blooms," because I knew she subscribed. And luckily, they did choose to run it. We slyly waited for her to discover the picture, but one of her grown daughters just couldn't wait, and hinted: "Mom, why don't you check out page 23?"

Nonni leafed through the magazine, found the photo of herself and gasped in astonishment: "Why, I have a blouse just like that!"

Birdhouses in Haverfield Park started out to be primarily ornamental, in places where the garden needed a little art. But, sure enough, "if you build it they will come," and many feathery families have appeared behind the mysterious little black holes.

Surprisingly, although Haverfield Park is dedicated to providing habitat for wildlife, I place people's enjoyment of the gardens first. In the populated world we live in, it takes human dollars to support birds and mammals. For this reason, I use traditional-style white painted birdhouses that provide bright focal points, even though birds prefer natural materials. And I limit the number of visible garden ornaments to avoid clutter. As time goes on and I become better educated, I expect to become more of a purist. After all, we've planted so much that birdhouses are really just a bonus, and there's plenty of room for cavity dwellings made of natural materials hidden in the trees.



If Purple Martins were local, this pole should be much taller, but since we leave these apartments open for anybirdy, we kept the house accessible by ladder.

We like the Western Bluebird family that has come the last two years to a conical little feeder/house combination found in a catalog. The parents are so brilliantly colored that they are easy to observe as they fly busily back and forth feeding their children.

E specially charming was the time a sunflower seed sprouted and grew out one of their windows, bending upward towards the sky to earn its name.

Since I'm not retired, I have no business building custom birdhouses when my own family doesn't even live in a finished house. But I can't resist customizing the ones I buy!

Ours are white, and for specific reasons: the colonial homes we plan here are very limited in color. Plain ol' white out in the garden jumps out if you place your ornament in front of a leafy dark backdrop. Ideally, birdhouses get a little bit of afternoon shade, but without branches so close that predators are led inside.

I even have one Purple Martin house, even though these birds are rare in California. Somebody can surely make use of those little dens, and I'm not particular as to my tenants, since I like all wildlife. I bought one of those metal houses available in catalogs everywhere and replaced an unattractive flat metal roof with an insulated steeper pitch made from siding scraps.

The owner of Santa Rosa's "Wild Birds Unlimited" says the best birdhouses have:

- Ventilation near the top
- Drainage
- Easy access for annual cleaning
- Entry holes sized for the variety of bird you wish to encourage
- No perch peg. Instead, you can attach a "predator block," which is just a little square of wood right over the entry hole, so that the hole goes through two thicknesses of wood. This helps protect eggs from predators.
- Entry holes away from prevailing winds



When nesting bluebirds move in, we leave seed elsewhere so they can be undisturbed.



In breezy West Petaluma, pole feeders will be more successful than the hanging kinds, and I like the sense of permanence that a brick base offers.

- Dappled light for best temperature
- Natural materials, especially on the inside

No building permit, no engineering fees! No worries about bugs getting into these houses! You can finally build anything you wish. Perhaps if your dream home is far in the future, you can get some satisfaction with a miniature version out in your garden to help you visualize your far-off goals.



Barbara Caswell, the owner of *Designs of the Times*, is the Sonoma County home and garden designer who created Haverfield Park. Her home is a nostalgic country estate with a showcase quality house in a private natural setting.