

Better Off With Bats ~

Historically, bats have been cast as terrifying night stalkers. This, however, is a misleading portrayal. “I’ve personally noticed,” says Erin Cord, Community Engagement Manager for *Bat Conservation International*, “that when I show people, who are generally afraid of bats, up-close photos of them, people are often surprised how cute and fragile they are.”

Good looks aside, bats have many other redeeming qualities, including being exceptional garden helpers. A little brown bat can devour 4,000 to 8,000 insects a night, helping manage garden pests such as midges, hoppers, moths, ants, and mosquitoes. Their pest control efforts also have a huge impact in farming industries. Bats contribute over \$3 Billion (with a “B”) worth of agricultural insect control a year in the U.S. Thanks to bats, farmers not only save on pesticide costs, but the overall environment and other wildlife also benefit when less pesticides are used.

Some bats are also pollinators and planters, dispersing seeds through their droppings (guano), which can add fertilizer to garden beds. Yet, despite their ecological services, bats are threatened.

In 2023, the *North American State of the Bats* report revealed that 53% of bat species were at risk of extinction, with habitat loss being a top reason. “Deforestation, the destruction of caves and rapid urbanization are shrinking the spaces bats need to survive. Many species are highly specialized and can’t adapt when their roosts disappear,” says Melissa Donnelly, science specialist with *Merlin Tuttle’s Bat Conservation*. White-nose syndrome, a deadly fungal disease, has also eradicated 90% of northern long-eared bat populations, another valued member of the garden’s pest-control brigade.

Fortunately, there are some things you can do at home to help your local bats. Most North American bats are insectivores, so cultivating plants that appeal to nocturnal insects and reducing your use of pesticides are the best ways to support bats. Where there are insects, bats are sure to follow.

Nocturnal bugs prefer flowers that open or stay open at night and are fragrant with pale-colored petals that stand out against the night sky. Honeysuckle, Datura and Evening Primrose are great native picks, and in parts of the Southwest, these plants might attract nectar-feeding bats that visit the area.

A Habitat to Call Home – a minimally lit or dark garden with trees, stumps and piles of wood mimics wilder natural surroundings. This encourages bats to

forage and roost. “Installing a bat house is another helpful action,” Melissa says, “but it’s important to do your research first. There’s no one-size-fits-all solution and like all wildlife, bats may or may not choose the roost you provide.”

According to Erin, bats drink midflight by skimming water off their wings. A pond or trough that is 7-to-8-feet wide without overhanging branches gives a bat room to swoop down and scoop up a much-needed sip.

When gardeners help provide safe spaces for bats to rest and forage, ecosystems are healthier. “If we didn’t have bats on the landscape, including our gardens, it would be dire,” Erin says.

Written by Jennifer Cole, a garden expert and writer in Vancouver, Canada, where she has planted a moonlit garden of white lilies, daises, and anemones to attract nighttime pollinators.

Edited by Keith Gourdin