

Gardening in the Zone[©]

with Iowa Gardening Magazine's Liz Gilman



Linda Naeve shows off her new birdhouse

Birdhouse Gourds

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This week we're going to talk about growing a certain vegetable... but not for eating. It's for the birds! I interviewed Linda Naeve, Extension program specialist at Iowa State University, about a cheap and creative way to grow your own birdhouses.

According to Naeve, birdhouse or bottle gourds from the *Lagenaria* genus in the squash family are unique and easy plants to grow. You plant them early in the spring in a well-drained location where they will receive full sun, keep them watered and watch them grow!

If you have already planted gourds, they will be ready to pick in the next few weeks. Be sure to leave a two to three inch stem on the gourd and you'll want to wipe them down with a weak bleach solution or disinfectant and lay them in a dry, well-ventilated area such as your garage. You can turn them frequently while they are drying and shake them to loosen the seeds. Naeve tells us that it may take 6 to 8 months until they are completely dry so in order to make a birdhouse this fall, you will need to buy a dried one at a pumpkin farm or garden center. The rind will be hard and dry and the seeds will rattle inside.

Now is when you turn them into birdhouses. You can carefully drill an entrance hole about one and a half inches in diameter- the size of a milk jug cap. This is a good size for attracting purple martins to nest in it. Purple martins eat a large number of mosquitoes... so we like them! You'll just want to make sure that you hang several gourd houses together on the same pole or tree because purple martins like to nest in colonies.

Then after you've drilled the hole and emptied out the inside seeds, you're ready to let your creative juices flow. You can use a wood burner or colorful acrylic paint or maybe just keep them natural looking and stain them and give them a coat of polyurethane to protect the birdhouses against the elements. Then drill holes at the top and attach a wire to hang your new birdhouse in a tree.

However you decide to decorate your gourd, I'm sure the birds will love their new house. And the neat thing is that you used nature to attract nature.

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