Enjoy Purple Martins in Your Garden
by Ursula Nanna, Bell County Master Gardener

Get your birdhouses Ready! Late February is the time to expect the arrival of scouts for the Native American bird the Purple Martin. The scouts come ahead of the migrating flocks to find suitable nesting sites. Scouts are older birds of either sex who have made the journey before and they come to claim old nesting places and to look for new ones. They usually arrive four to six weeks ahead of the rest of the migration.

Martins will fly round-trip about 5,000 miles from South America to Canada using three major routes: through Mexico to the West coast; across the Gulf of Mexico to the west; and from the Yucatan Peninsula through the Caribbean islands to Florida. They move north as the weather warms and the insect populations increase.

Get your boxes and gourds up now. The scouts will first go back to areas where they successfully nested before. The scouts will arrive and begin to set up house. If you have never put up houses before you can wait until the main flock arrives starting in late March. Last year.s juveniles will be looking for new areas to set up their nesting areas.

To attract Purple Martins to your property, the requirement is location, location, location. Martins don.t like trees or bushes close to their nesting sites as these may harbor predators. If the Martins don.t feel safe, they won.t stay around. Martins like to swoop in to their nests. As a rule of thumb the nesting site should be about forty feet from buildings and trees. They also like to drink and bathe “on the wing” so keep some open water near the site. Martins nest in colonies so birdhouses with multiple nest boxes are recommended or you can also hang multiple gourds up on poles for these gregarious birds. Depending on the type of housing offered, a martin nest can be any height from 10 to 20 feet off the ground. Start at 20 feet and lower the poles if they don.t attract any birds. These birds have bubbly personality and are a delight to have in the area. They also eat all types of food to include lots of insects, not just mosquitoes. Like many other cavity nesters they have become dependant on humans for housing. When you erect martin housing be sure to have an easy way to raise and lower the nest boxes such as telescoping poles or a pulley system. This is necessary in order to clean out the nest boxes after the birds have left in the fall.

Major Martin pests include the English sparrow and the European Starling. Both these birds compete with the martins for nesting space. These non-native birds will take over martin nests even killing the young and destroying eggs to establish their own nests. Predators to the martins include housecats, raccoons, squirrels, and snakes. Use a metal pole with an inverted cone installed on the poles at least 5 feet above the ground and it should discourage these predators. Owls can also be a problem but there is little you can do here except accept nature.s selection process. Other threats to the young include mites, lice, and blowflies. When nests are properly cleaned with mild detergent and at intervals treated with 5% Seven dust these parasites should be little problem.

So hummm. Wood, plastic, metal, or gourds? What material should the housing be made of? That is truly a matter of preference and requirements. Just remember that Martins are "groupies": and like to hang out with their own kind and the best way to accomplish this is to offer tenant-type housing with lots of rooms in them like 8-12 to start. If choosing a wooden house, or are making your own from wood, use light weather-resistant materials and NEVER use treated wood as the chemical may harm or kill the birds. A good wood is Western Cedar and it has great insulating properties from the heat or cold and the natural resins will protect the house from the elements. In my experience plastic is not suitable for martin houses. They may look pretty to the neighbors, but remember your purpose, to attract and house Martins. If you purchase plastic, be sure that have full access to the inside for cleaning purposes. Believe me you.ill need it. Some choose gourds because they are light, cheap, care free and can be replaced easily. They should be painted white, as should all martin houses, to reflect the heat. Regardless of material, the nesting dimensions should be at least 6.x6.x12. with entry holes 1 3/16 inches wide to try and keep out the starlings. Since the houses have to be cleaned out at least seasonally and inspected periodically for pests and pest birds, aluminum houses are light and easily worked. These houses are not cheap, so go for quality. You may pay for a good house now, but they.ill give you years of service.
Martins rear only one brood a year with pure white eggs laid shortly after nest completion. Both male and female begin the nest construction; the female puts on the final touches and does most of the incubating. Just prior to hatching the parents bring green leaves to the nest site, perhaps to keep away parasites. After 16 days the young hatch. Both parents feed the young which fledge after about 28-30 days.

Purple Martins are fast and acrobatic flyers. They will put on quite a show while foraging for food for themselves and their young. The hatchlings are not quite as graceful and it is fun to watch as they learn the skills of flying and catching their own supper. Both adults and fledglings form a large pre-migratory roost to prepare for the long trip to South America. After the birds have migrated, take down the houses, clean them, dust them with 5% Seven dust, and store them away until next year. This will keep pest birds and parasites from establishing themselves in the Martin nests. I am getting my houses ready now, and like you, I anxiously waiting for sign of returning Martins.