

Purple Martins and Knockout Roses

A lot going on just now. This week is Murray County Jr. Livestock Show, and also time for the return of purple martins and pruning of knockout roses.

These delightful birds, native to North America, are historically unique because nesting colonies were associated with Native American grower societies, who hung gourd houses near their villages.

Many purple martins winter in Brazil, where nocturnal roosts of 25,000 to 250,000 birds form in town squares. Martins begin returning to North America in early spring. A return trip to southern Oklahoma entails just over a 3,000-mile trip, one way! Northbound martins begin arriving in our area around the last week of February, and arrival dates vary from two to four weeks, depending on the weather. These early birds are often referred to as scouts and were thought to be seeking new or better nesting sites. However, research done by martin enthusiasts at the Purple Martin Conservation Association, has provided helpful information for would-be martin landlords. Martin scouts are older adult birds that typically are merely returning to established colonies. Yearling martins, which arrive four to ten weeks after the scouts, are the ones searching for new colony sites. Many folks attempting to attract martins put up or open the birdhouses in February. The mistake here is that in the interim, before the yearling martins arrive, competing species such as the English house sparrow or European starling take up residence and fend off interested martins. Prospective martin landlords should open the houses about four weeks after the first martins are scheduled to arrive in their area. Martins initiate nesting attempts as late as June, so don't be discouraged if you don't appear to be getting early results. Timing is a critical component of attracting martins and once they establish nesting colonies, will return year after year to breed.

One of the reasons people fail to attract martins is improper housing location. Martin housing should be placed 30 to 100 feet from human's dwellings, in the most open site available, and at least 40 feet from trees that are taller than the martin house. The houses should be placed 10 to 20 feet above the ground.

Nest compartments for martins should be at least 6 inches square, but a little larger is even better. White housing is most attractive to martins, and the large birdhouse gourds — some are 10 to 12 inches in diameter — are hard to beat. Place housing on some type of pole that allows you to check nesting progress and remove the house during winter.

Predation is the most common reason for nest-site abandonment. Nearby shrubs or wires attached to martin house poles facilitate predator access. The black rat snake is incredibly adept at climbing. Use cone or wire mesh predator guards.

By the way, contrary to popular belief, food habit studies done on purple martins revealed very few mosquitoes in their diet. They prefer to feed on larger winged insects such as flies, wasps, beetles, and dragonflies.

Purple martins are most enjoyable neighbors and with proper colony management will return to entertain their landlord with delightful song and aerobatic elegance year after year.

Pruning Knockout Roses – Knockout roses (Double red Knockout® rose, *Rosa* hybrid ‘Radtko’) have been very popular the last few years. They are easy to grow and have few disease problems. You may have noticed they also grow vigorously. Knockouts go through several growth spurts each season putting on as much as two feet of new growth in a single season. So when it comes to pruning, we can be fairly aggressive.

Roses are pruned when the buds begin to swell but before they open, usually late February or early March. A good rule of thumb is to prune roses when the forsythia are in bloom. Use a sharp bypass pruner to make clean cuts. First remove any dead or damaged wood cutting it as low as possible. Also remove any spindly branches growing from the base of the shrub.

Now we can cut the shrub back hard. Knockouts are considered full grown when they reach a height of 4 feet. Considering their vigorous growth, we want to cut the plants back to 2 feet above the ground to maintain this ideal mature size. Of course, you can allow the plants to grow larger if you wish. Simply cut back the shrubs to 2 feet below the desired height. You can also cut more severely to maintain a smaller shrub.

Make pruning cuts at a 45 degree angle one quarter inch above a bud. This prevents the development of ugly dead stumps at the branch tips. It is best to make cuts above an outward facing bud to encourage new growth outward rather than in toward the interior of the plant.

You may also need to do a little shaping of the plant removing any branches that do not contribute to the desired form. You can also remove a few interior branches to improve air circulation. About every 2 to 3 years you can remove up to one third of the oldest branches to stimulate new growth.

Please feel free to stop by or contact me if I can be of assistance.

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