

## **Something Special for the Birds!**

Because the wrens at my house insist on nesting under the top of the propane tank, I haven't thought I needed a birdhouse. However, at the March Master Gardeners meeting I saw an elegant birdhouse designed for bluebirds. I had to have one! It is now secured to an oak tree and I can't remember when I've been so pleased with something new.

Skillfully made by the Northern Neck Audubon Society, these shelters are specifically built for bluebirds, made of long-lasting cedar with the nest hole extended by a 2" X 4" block to prevent larger birds from enlarging the hole.

The Northern Neck Audubon Society has made more than 10,000 bluebird houses over the last ten years. This organization has made sure the precious bluebird has graced our area. The NNAS also works to conserve the pristine areas of the Northern Neck, that beautiful slice of Virginia between the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers. This area is a magnet for "birders" as it is home to more than 250 species of birds as well as hosting more than a million wintering waterfowl each year. If you wish to join in their activities contact [www.northernneckaudubon.org](http://www.northernneckaudubon.org).

Bluebirds are not merely beautiful, although to watch their winged dance across an open space, you could believe their beauty is enough! They are among the most useful of the thrushes. When you consider the quantities of food required to keep a bird's metabolism functioning, you can imagine how we'd be awash in bugs were not birds feasting on them! Those birds that also dine on berries play an essential role in the local ecosystem.

This handsome birdhouse comes complete with directions for selecting a site, all the screws and nails required, and information about the nesting habits of bluebirds. All you need is a hammer or a friend with a drill. To save you a search or a trek to the Northern Neck, two Gloucester businesses have kindly agreed to offer them for the price the NNAS is asking, \$15 – a great value! "Curves" at Edgehill Shopping Center, 6736 Main St., owned and managed by Linda Tyler, has them. Curves is open M – Th., 7 to 7, Fri. 7-6 and Sat. 9-12.

In Ware Neck, the Morning Glory Gallery has the birdhouses and the gallery is open Tuesday through Friday and Saturday morning. If you need quantities or have questions you may call Felicity Ericson at 693-7140.

## **Tips From Everywhere!**

A reader in Cobbs Creek has graciously sent information from the newsletter of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. I am delighted to share some of their tips with you. One intriguing bit of information will be helpful if it was too cold and snowy for you to plant your peas on Washington's Birthday. U. of Mass. Researchers have discovered that soaking pea seeds for 24-48 hours in water containing either Vitamin C or folic acid

resulted in optimum growth, both topside and of the roots. You might be interested in experimenting with other seeds and those dietary supplements that you didn't get around to taking yourself.

One important thing I learned from the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's 'Growing Tips' was that planting food crops too close to the road could be dangerous to your health. In an earlier column I suggested that if you had no sun in the back of your house, plant your vegetable garden out front. Having so little traffic where I live, I wasn't thinking of busy streets. The article states that when lead was removed from gasoline in the 70s and 80s we stopped worrying about contamination from vehicle exhaust reaching our lettuce. Alas, even though catalytic converters reduce emissions of several pollutants, they themselves contain the heavy metals platinum, palladium, and rhodium that are released through the tailpipe. French researchers using rye grass planted within 16 feet of a busy road found that the plants absorbed these toxic heavy metals and even when moved away there was little lessening of the heavy-metal concentrations.

In the absence of further and long-term testing no one can claim eating strawberries grown near a highway will cause genetic damage but surely it would be sensible for gardeners living near or on busy roads to keep their food crops as far away from the road as possible.