

# Creature Comforts Boost Retail Sales

Housing for birds, bats and toads enhance waterscapes as well as business, experts say. **BY ALETA WALTHER**



Pros report an increase in birdhouse sales.

Unbeknownst to many, ponds and water gardens provide two of the four essential elements necessary for attracting backyard wildlife — specifically birds, bats and toads. Wildlife need places to (1) hunt for food, (2) drink and bathe, (3) rest and nest and (4) shelter from predators and inclement weather.

Water elements provide wildlife with hydration, bathing and, in the case of toads, a suitable environment to reproduce. Water also attracts insects that many bird and bat species feast on, as do adult toads. Incorporate nesting and shelter options into water-focused landscaping, and these beneficial critters will take up residence while helping create a serene, balanced ecosystem.

Many pond and water garden wholesalers and retailers report selling more bird, bat and toad houses today than ever before. They said consumers want wildlife abodes to be more wildlife-friendly than decorative, available in a variety of styles, sizes and price points, durable and made of nontoxic materials, resistant to predators and easy to clean.

Consumers today are more aware and better educated about the environment through organizations such as the National Wildlife Federation. They better understand the need to provide habitats that offer nourishment, shelter and protection for wildlife, particularly birds and bats.

For example, according to the Organization of Bat Conservation,



Bats also need safe places, such as bat houses, to raise offspring and overcome common disease, such as white nose syndrome.

white nose syndrome is decimating several bat species in the Eastern United States and Canada. Caused by a non-native, cold-loving fungus, the disease attacks and usually infects bats that hibernate in caves throughout the summer.

"Bats that rest in bat houses in the summer months have a better chance of rebounding from white nose syndrome," said Dawn Vezina, education specialist with the Organization of Bat Conservation. "They also need safe places to raise their offspring, and bat houses are safer than, let's say, an attic."

Therefore, the organization recommends that homeowners install bat houses that provide adequate roosting for bats.

"We find that there is great demand for water features that attract birds," said Jake Langeslag owner of Aqua Eden, a professional pond construction and supply company in Faribault, Minn. "The more functions a waterscape has, the more value it brings to the property. In addition, bird watching is popular with many gardeners. Building a water feature that attracts birds combines two popular hobbies."

An ecologist, Langeslag installs and maintains water gardens, ponds, waterfalls, streams and fountains, and often incorporates bird-attracting features into his designs. When he educates customers on the value and beauty birds bring to gardens, most customers add birdhouses and feeders, which he sells as installation components.

"I often recommend that customers consider birdhouses to complement to their water gardens and ponds," Langeslag said. "I also provide customers with the information they need to make the right choices for bird habitat, feed and water."

John Holmes, owner of Holmes Farm, and Jeremy Woeste, merchandising manager for retailer BestNest Inc., each said and pond retailers should educate customers on the benefits of incorporating wildlife amenities into their waterscape designs.

"Birding is a great tie-in to water gardening and landscaping," Woeste said. "More water gardening and landscaping companies are cross-selling birding products."

Located in Cincinnati, BestNest sells pond pumps and liners and backyard wildlife products, including more than 500 styles of birdhouses from \$9.99 to more than \$500. BestNest also offers 29 styles of bat houses and five styles of toad houses.

"Our birding category sales are steady with high-end birdhouses on the upswing," he said. "Consumers have maintained a demand

for birdhouses, but there always will be fluctuation in this demand because customers struggle between form and function. Most customers care about function, but no one wants to put up an ugly birdhouse."

Woeste said the demand for bat and toad houses has been "a bit more volatile" compared to birdhouses, with bat houses outselling toad houses.

Holmes, who founded Holmes Farms in 1966, said his wholesale business also is experiencing sales growth from its wildbird products, however, sales are driven by consumers, not water garden, pond or specialty retailers.

"I don't see designers or installers putting in bird or toad houses...but it would be a good idea if they did," Holmes said. "Wildlife houses are something homeown-ers ally add themselves."

Based in Barto, Pa., Holmes Farms distributes pond, wildbird and pet products through garden centers, specialty pond shops, landscapers and pet stores. It has offered bird and toad houses for the last four years, and sales have increased yearly.

Holmes said the birdhouses he sells are more functional than decorative and he markets and prices them as "good, better, best." The company currently sells several styles of birdhouses and is looking to stock a wider variety in response to demand.

Bobbo Inc., a wholesale importer of garden giftware and decorative home décor, sells more than 100 fanciful birdhouse designs. In fact, birdhouses are the company's best-selling category.

"We are seeing a huge uptick in

birdhouse sales; seeing demand for practical enclosures with a strong sense of whimsy," Johnson said. "More homeowners are enjoying their gardens and have discovered that attracting birds adds to the pleasure."

Located in Mexico, Mo., Gold Crest Distributing also reported increasing demand for its bird, bat and toad houses. Gold Crest sells about 200 styles of birdhouses with retail pricing between \$5 to \$100. The company offers five different toad houses that sell for \$5 to \$15 retail. The wholesale distributor also offers a variety of bat houses manufactured by Looker Products, which now is part of

"BIRD WATCHING IS POPULAR WITH MANY GARDENERS. BUILDING A WATER FEATURE THAT ATTRACTS BIRDS COMBINES TWO POPULAR HOBBIES."

President Mel Toellner said species-specific birdhouses and boxes are hot sellers for Gold Crest, including nest-homeowners using screech owls, downy woodpeckers, wood ducks and chickadees. Customers want the best functional nest boxes available, made of long-lasting cedar with non-rusting hardware, he said. Birdhouses with plexiglass viewing panels are Gold Crest's best-selling wildlife dwellings.

Gold Crest also reported a huge increase in sales of bat houses manufactured by Looker Products. According to Toellner, this is because Looker Products manufactures its bat houses to specifications provided by the Organization of Bat Conservation. Looker Products' houses log a bat occupancy rate of about 80 percent compared to the industry standard of 50 percent occupancy. **WGN**

Aleta Walther is a freelance writer based in Southern California.

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## 4 Basic Needs of Birds, Bats, Toads

COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

- FOOD:** Landscaping should provide fruit, seeds and insects, and other small animals that birds feed on. Birdfeeders are an option, particularly during winter snow and cold, summer heat and drought, and during annual migrations. Provide outdoor lighting, and bats and toads will feast on the insects the lighting attracts.
- WATER:** Birds need water for drinking and bathing. Bats need larger expanses of water for drinking because they drink while in flight, but smaller water gardens and ponds attract insects for bats to feed upon. Toads need semi-permanent, fresh water for feeding, breeding and early development.
- REST AND NEST:** Wildlife need places to rest, engage in courtship, mate and bare and raise its young. Water gardens, ponds, nesting boxes, birdhouses and mature trees are suitable habitats for resting and nesting depending on the wildlife species.
- SHELTER:** Whether it is a safe place for sleeping, a protected haven from the elements or a hiding place to elude predators, providing shelter is key to making a property bird-, bat-, or toad-friendly. — A.W.



Toads need water for drinking as well as for reproduction and early development.

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Many people do not realize that water features naturally attract backyard wildlife by providing a place for drinking and bathing.

**Bonus Content:**

"How to Upsell Wildlife Habitat Products" @ [WaterGardenNews.com/upsell](http://WaterGardenNews.com/upsell)

"Keys to Selling Toad Houses" @ [WaterGardenNews.com/toadhouse](http://WaterGardenNews.com/toadhouse)

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