

# Natural Insect Homes

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*As the clouds poured their wrath on extensive areas of Johannesburg and Durban these past two weeks, my heart went out to the urban wildlife. Were there enough hideouts into which they could crawl for safety?*

We're happy to include their food sources, the attractive flowers and brightly coloured fruits and seeds that colour our gardens, but don't as actively include natural homes and materials they need to build them. So, how can we help?

The answer for many is the bug hotel. Now, I love Bug Hotels, those charming little humans-for-insect features that we have such fun building. There is something about the precise, structured design and use of old materials lying around – man-made and natural – that echo many of the modern homes that our urban wildlife builds nowadays; when in survival mode 'n boer maak a plan, né? And making them suggests you are considering the needs of insects, and doing something about it. Great. That said and cute as they are, many end up being more ornamental than functional, the garden equivalent of the table doily, serving no real purpose other than to dress it up. Purported to attract bees, ladybirds, spiders, lacewings, beetles, centipedes, woodlice and millipedes, they by no means offer complete housing requirements for this group. Such a vastly diverse insect world requires a range of nesting materials and places to build them, so we need wildlife-friendly gardens to provide a variety of Nature-built homes too!

## Nature Built Bug Hotels:

- Many tiny creatures will crawl into the hollow stems of herbaceous plants and shrubs, *Buddleja*, *Salvia* and *Agapanthus* species for example. Both adult insects and their larvae need places in which to overwinter or rest during storms.
- Dead vegetation, leaf litter and log piles are used as hibernating and breeding sites, by ladybirds and beetles among others.
- As long as there is no structural risk, small holes in the mortar between bricks offer warm, protected sites in which to hibernate and breed. You can also build small gravel or rock piles in sunny locations.
- Don't be too quick to remove flowers gone to seed. Seed pods and hard seeds, like *Aloe chabaudii* seem in the images below, house tiny beetles and other creatures until they split to release their seed. Yes, they will make a meal of them, so collect a few and leave the rest for the animal world.
- Tightly packed plants and those with firm leaves and dense vegetative cover offer quick refuge during storms.
- Solitary bees and wasps like to burrow into dry, sunny banks or warm patches of bare earth in lawns or garden beds, or even among a pile of stones. Keep sections of the bank free of

dense vegetation, and don't rush to cover gaps in the lawn. Too thick a mulch layer can also interfere with a bee's ability to nest underground; create patches of thin mulch or bare soil.

- Keep old stumps and logs; not only will they be colonised by fungi and lichen, but bees and wasps carve out nests as they burrow into the soft wood. Wasps use chewed bits of old wood to build nests attached elsewhere. You can give insects, bees, in particular, a head-start by drilling holes in the newer logs and stumps. Carpenter bees nest in tunnels in wood; rest easy though, for unlike termites, they do not eat the wood.
- And, mentioning termites, do you know they farm the soil fungi so crucial to plants' ability to take up nutrients?
- Either let 'deadfall' from trees and large shrubs remain where it lands, or combine it into deadwood piles; they'll soon be colonised by many insects species. Bundles of bamboo or hollow shrub stems will also be used as homes by lacewings and ladybirds, bees, invertebrates, reptiles, beetles.
- Allow mud puddles to form; insects like bees, wasps and birds use mud to build nests. Butterflies sip up important nutrients from the mud.
- Compost heaps: as a source of homemade fertiliser, a compost heap is an essential component of all gardens. They are also home to beetles, caterpillars and earthworms who in turn feed foraging birds like robins, thrush and even hornbills.
- Thick hedges of twining branches, thorns and dense foliage, are residential apartments to birds, mice and chameleons.
- Long grass and grassland flowers like nettles are favoured nesting sites of butterflies, ladybirds, fire-flies and mice. And we must not forget the rodents, for they keep our raptors and owls fed!
- That every garden should have a pond, still, unfortunately, needs to be said! Some of the most effective predators live and breed in and around wildlife ponds. Frogs, dragonflies, and damselflies require water in which to lay eggs, and bats need large enough open water as they drink on the wing. In my garden, robins and thrushes hunt insects in the mud, and wasps collect mud for nests.
- Climbers are a favourite nesting spot because the wall on one side and a camouflage of leaves on the other provide safe protection.
- Many birds will not nest in man-provided boxes, preferring to build their own out of twigs and grasses, lichen and even pet hair. Provide plenty of safe nesting sites by planting dense-growing shrubs and trees, and leave piles of suitable nest-building material for the birds to collect – wild grass fronds, soft seed and twigs. Swallows need to collect large amounts of mud to build their tunnel homes we commonly see under the eaves of a building.
- Plant a tree with a bug hotel already built into the design: those with loose bark bring in beetles, caterpillars, bees and ladybirds. *Vachellia (Acacia) sieberiana*, *Commiphora harveyi* and *Trema orientalis* are excellent examples.

- Wildlife thrives when it isn't disturbed, so where possible have an exclusion area in your garden that you just leave alone and let the plants and animals design it to their liking.

One last point; most insects like a food source close to their nests, so, to ensure full hotel occupancy rates, make sure your garden offers tasty food for as many adult species as possible.