

## *Dishing the Dirt: Advice from a Master Gardener*

Make beneficial insects feel at home in your garden!

Thank you to MG Mike Smith for authoring this important and fun DIY lesson:

Insects are vital to a garden and are responsible for pollination. At our home we have many feeders and birdbaths to attract birds; for insects we recently built an insect house or "hotel." Insect houses contain nooks and crannies to accommodate a range of beneficial insects including solitary bees, beetles, lady bugs and others.

The house may be made from scrap wood, old boxes, or even built into the nooks and crannies of a dry stone wall. It's best to use wood that will stand up to the weather, but avoid woods that are varnished, painted or treated with wood protectant, which will repel insects. (In fact, bugs like rotting wood!)

To fill the cubbyholes in our hotel, I used rotting bark, pine cones, and -- for the bees -- paper tubes. Many other materials can be used such as cut, hollow bamboo; wood shavings or chips; twigs; and corrugated paper and cardboard.

Logs or pieces of wood with holes drilled in them can also be used. Drill 1/4" holes for leafcutter bees and 5/16" holes for mason bees. Space the holes about 3/4" apart. Mason bees like their holes to be 6" deep; and leafcutter bees like them 2-1/2" to 4" deep. Bees lay their eggs in the tubes and holes. In the spring, the young bees will chew their way out of the holes to begin a new lifecycle.

The finished hotel should be placed against a wall or other flat surface, with the front facing south or southwest, where it gets the most sun exposure to keep the bees warm in the winter. (Yes, this is a 24/7/365 bee abode!)



A newborn leafcutter bee emerges from its leaf-lined incubator.  
(10)



Mike's luxury insect condo (11)

DIY information and images of all manner of insect house plans and designs are available online. One thing most have in common is a roof to provide protection from the rain and predators. Many hotels don't use a box, but rather are simply stacks of old pallets with nesting materials in between the layers.

Every year I pile up cuttings from pruning for burning come the next early summer. The rest of the year, including winter thru early spring, these piles are homes for insects, birds and small animals.

In addition to my new large insect house, I have two smaller ones. I'm having Air Bee & Bee handle the rentals.

*Certified Master Gardener Mike Smith lives and gardens in Stoughton with his wife Florence. One of his early jobs was as a U. S. Army bomb disposal technician a "strange path," he says, to becoming a gardener. Retired from the U.S. Postal Service, Mike has an info tech background and volunteers as webmaster for the MMGA website, <http://massmastergardeners.org>.*