

Nest boxes

At the beginning of the year we were alerted by the results of a European study which noticed the very sharp decrease in the number of birds, especially of sparrows, around inhabited places. There are several reasons for this situation. On one hand, the disappearance of a large number of suitable nesting sites and, on the other hand, the reduction of the available prey volume, as a result of agricultural practices and the use of insecticides.



On our allotment sites and on our plots, though modestly, we can act on both of these factors. First, by installing nest boxes, then, second, by making sure that, there is a well-stocked natural pantry all around.

Before setting up a nest box, you must choose a place that best guarantees the, safety both of the brood, and the parents who look after it. In our gardens there can be wild predators as, for example, beech martens or weasels. Above all, however, there are cats. It might be wild cats or cats with owners, filled bowls and soft cushions, but who, as soon as they leave the home of their master, go hunting. Recent studies show not only that this expedition is much longer than previously

estimated, but also that the cats found were often not the ones expected.

So, watch out for anything that can be used as a footstool, hiding place or perch for cats.

For the same reasons a nest box must be very strongly and securely fixed. It must resist all weather conditions and possible unwanted solicitations, as for example, from magpies and crows in particular. The presence of a few bushy shrubs will allow the young birds to go to safety when they leave the nest for the first time.

For a nest box to function, it must comply with a certain number of constraints: it must be adapted to the nesting sites needed by those species of birds present on the site or for those you want to attract.

One of the most important elements is the diameter of the flight hole. For small birds (blue tit, crested tit, marsh tit, coal tit) and tree sparrow it should be 26 to 28 mm. For birds a little bit bigger, like the tit or the red tail white face, it should be 32 to 34 mm. The distance between the base of the flight hole and the bottom of the nest box must be at least 17 cm, so that the young birds remain out of the predators' reach.

Inside the nest box at least one of the boards must be sufficiently rough, so that the nestlings can cling to it to climb and leave the nest. Do not hesitate to "rework" it with a chisel if necessary.

Here are the dimensions of the different elements for a simple nest box, which can be cut from a board of 2 meters long, 180 mm wide and 20 mm thick:

Roof: 180 x 220 mm
Base: 120 x 140 mm
Back: 120 x 270 mm
Front: 120 x 250 mm
Sides: 270 x 180 mm



To accommodate other species of birds, different types of nest boxes can be integrated during the construction of a garden shed. In the North of France, we still can find “sparrow pots” that work very well. That’s all for the shelter. Let’s now go to the table.

Herethe strict application of the allotment gardens rules established by the Fédération nationale des Jardins Familiaux et collectifs (French allotment garden federation) finds its full justification.

In order for young birds, as well as the gardener’s children, to receive a healthy and sufficient diet, the use of any chemical product and insecticide must be permanently banned. These products are considered as being insectivores so you must leave them their prey at least during the feeding period of the young. They take extremely well care of them. It is rare for cabbage white butterfly caterpillars to fully develop in a garden with a busy nest box. And it is the same for many insects.

In addition, the mulching of crops and a few piles of decaying plants in the corner also bring prey in large number.

Remember to have a bowl with clean water near the nest box. If the bowl is large, always leave a bundle of wood that will serve as a perch and will prevent drowning.

New nest boxes must be installed in early winter. The existing nest boxes that have already been used, have to be cleaned and disinfected before they are put back into place at the same time in early winter.....

If you want to get started with the installation of nesting boxes at a large-scale, it is absolutely necessary to get into contact with the bird protection league, which has up-to-date information and scientifically validated technical data.

Serge Ratié