Interested in entering the hospitality industry? Open an insect hotel

What is an insect hotel, you may ask? An insect hotel is a covered shelter that provides a habitat for insects. Most commonly, it resembles an open-front birdhouse with a roofline, sides, bottom, and solid back.

An insect hotel offers sanctuary for insects to overwinter and provides a place for valuable pollinators to remain in a garden with protection from the elements.

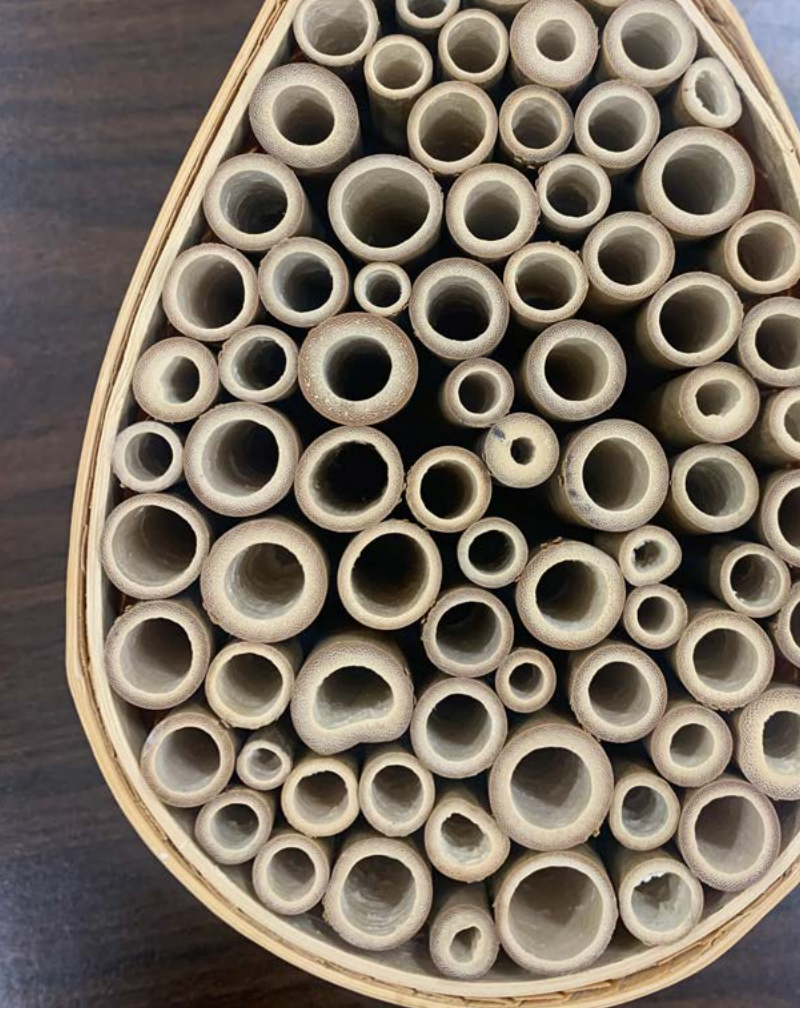
Protect pollinators

In both rural and urban areas, successful gardening requires knowledge about plants, insects, and other useful animals that contribute to creating a beneficial habitat.

Anything that moves pollen from the stamen to the stigma of a plant is considered a pollinator. Birds, bees, wasps, moths, spiders, ladybugs, lacewings, bats, and even wind can serve as pollinators.

Most flowering plants, including those that provide the food we eat, need pollinators. Bees are the most widely known pollinators, responsible for pollination of plants like apples, cucumbers, onions, peppers, strawberries, almonds, coffee, garlic, soybeans, sunflowers, alfalfa, and clover.

This insect hotel is made from natural, untreated wood. There is not varnish or paint that would repel insects. The tubes are smooth, without splinters, and the holes are of varying sizes to support several species of insect. The roof is solid and wide enough to protect the inner workings from rain. In addition, the placement is off the ground, higher than the surrounding flowers, and is facing south. The plants around the hotel are also encouraging to pollinators. Photo by danylamote, stock.adobe.com.



When buying or building an insect hotel, steer clear of large gaps or holes like the ones in this storebought structure. These holes could provide habitat for unwelcome visitors like predator insects or kleptoparasites. Photo by Abby Perry.

Many pollinator populations are declining due to a variety of reasons, but one important one is habitat loss. The purpose of an insect hotel is to protect pollinators while keeping them close to your garden.

Create a five-star hotel

Insect hotels should be made of materials found in nature. The use of plastic or glass is not encouraged and can actually be detrimental to the insects you are trying to protect. These materials don't absorb water and can encourage mold growth. Instead, use natural, untreated wood.

Some designs incorporate bricks into the housing element for the holes they provide. Using terra cotta tiles for a roof is another option if that is the material on hand.

A sturdy shelter with a roof to protect the interior from the elements is a must. The front of the hotel may have dividers to allow for easy stacking of materials, creating insect habitat. Pack the materials inside tightly, but do not use glue to keep them in.

An insect hotel should be south or southeast facing, approximately 3–5 feet off the ground, and secured tightly to avoid moving in windy conditions. The area in front of the structure should be kept free of plants that could hide entrances to the tunnels.

Not all insect hotels are created equal. Many pre-fab hotels are poorly designed or don't meet the needs of target insects. Creating small habitats that are specific to the types of insects you are hoping to attract is crucial.

Know your guests

Some **native bees** require holes of specific diameter to winter. Holes should be drilled deep enough, and without splinters, for the best habitat for burrowing bees. For specific bees, such as leaf-cutter bees, the holes should be 2–10 millimeters in diameter and should only be accessible from the front. Holes that are too big risk disease, overcrowding, or parasite infestation.

Even a 1-millimeter difference in diameter can invite invasive bee species or wasps to nest in the holes, potentially harming the native bees. Parasitism happens when kleptoparasites lay their eggs in tubes or cells occupied by bee larvae. The parasitic larvae hatch, consume the pollen that was stored, and kill the bee larvae inside.

In addition to bees, insect hotels also attract **ladybugs**. They tend to hibernate in between pine cones or small boards to create small cavities for groups, while **lacewings** lay eggs in hay or rolled cardboard.

For **butterfly** homes, it's important to use vertical slats or spacing to replicate the gap between bark and tree trunks.

Earwigs are predatory insects that help control unwanted bugs, especially near fruit trees. Hanging a terracotta flower pot upside down, filled with straw, provides an ideal habitat for earwigs.

Note that crafting all of these habitats in one hotel may create more problems than a safe haven. Creating small, insect-specific sanctuaries is the most effective way to entice pollinators to stay.

Unwanted guests

Be aware that insect hotels can also bring an undesirable element to your yard. Spiders, ants, and birds might use the insect hotel as an easy meal.

Upkeep

Like their human counterparts, insect hotels require maintenance. Checking for unwanted pests is very important. You don't want to be hosting a batch of cow-killer wasps in your yard.

Cleaning the holes in the spring, when insects are becoming more active, with a diluted bleach mixture can help kill parasites that may have found refuge in the hotel over the winter. Nine parts water to one part bleach is a good rule of thumb.

Mold is another thing to watch for and remove each spring. Replacing nesting materials can also help encourage healthy habitats.

Make your garden more pollinator friendly

Other ways to encourage pollinators in your garden include the following.

- Avoid overuse of pesticides.
- Don't over-trim plants, trees, and shrubs during autumn and spring.
- Create spaces for other beneficial animals such as toads and bats.
- Plant a variety of flowering plants that provide nectar and pollen.

An insect hotel can provide a way to watch nature in all its glory while conserving insects that are vital to the ecosystem. Educating yourself about the insects in your area and their habitats can create a new way to connect with nature, while enhancing the pollinator experience in your own backyard.

Sara Fleenor regularly receives five-star reviews from the pollinators overwintering in her backyard. A UW Extension educator based in Crook County, she can be contacted at sfleenor@uwyo.edu or (307) 283-1192.