

Nest-building materials

“One man’s junk is another man’s treasure” – why you should cut down on your tidying up!

Though spring is past, it is still a good time to look at nesting sites and material provided by your urban garden. Are they sufficient?

During spring nest-building time in the garden, the man of the house is on the look-out for three things: a good source of food, suitable building materials, and, position, position, position! Most gardeners focus on providing food for birds, but this is both a temporary and seasonal activity; you will also need trees and shrubs that offer protection and security and a variety of nest-building materials to keep these visitors in your garden. Providing these materials need not be a separate task full of effort; it is as simple creating habitats within your gardens, and allowing these ecosystems to function as they would do in nature.

Whether hidden away from predators in a tangle of vines or hanging precariously from the narrowest branch tip, the variety of building materials used by garden birds is intriguing. We expect to see twigs, grass, mud, and plant matter, but spider webs, lichen, the fine plant roots on the soil surface, pet hair, string, feathers, wool, and dried fruits are all made use of, and commonly bound together with spider’s web. Lichen, it seems, helps to camouflage the nest against the tree branches. Just a word about wool; while birds will make use of it if available, it does contain dye and takes an age to decompose, so rather offer natural materials that have no negative environmental impact.

A sunbird nest indicates foraging skills of note; they make use of lichen, feathers, hair, dried leaves, bark and other plant material, binding them securely with strands of spider's web. In fact, it would amaze you to learn just how many different species use the fine but strong – and sticky – strands of the web as a natural cement to hold the variety of building components together. Hint; to provide for birds, we need to garden for spiders too. Soft materials finish off the interior bedding; moss (Cape White-eyes), seed heads, even softwood scrapings and dried grass provide warmth and insulation for both eggs and hatchlings. Weavers, for example, need grass and leaf strips, and line nests with soft seed heads. The long, dried grass at the end of winter is perfect for nest-building, snapped up by Cape Robin-chats, Bulbuls, Sparrows, and a few Sunbird species.

And a place is needed to site the home; thorn trees, fence poles, vines, thickets, multi-stemmed and spiny shrubs, are all popular sites. Tall trees and a distant mixed shrubbery with dense foliage will provide a quiet place away from human activity. Weavers, White-eyes, and Sunbirds frequently pull strands from the coir mat lining a hanging basket on the patio, and gardeners can also place string and small bits of fabric beneath shrubs and in the fork of trees. But, most of all, don’t tidy way the mess of leaves, twigs, strips of dried grass, seed heads, moss and lichen – and, come spring-time, the nest building activity will enthrall you.