

BELL COUNTY MASTER GARDENER

Tip of the Week

By Beverly Wickersham

“The Barn Swallow: A Welcome Visitor”

I know that the Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) have returned from their winter home when I hear their twittering call in early spring. This species winters throughout the Southern Hemisphere, as far south as Argentina, but spends spring and summer in North America as far north as Alaska, traveling a distance of about 7,000 miles. These birds occur across North America and also live in Europe and Asia. I welcome these beautiful birds for a number of reasons. Their gifts to us are numerous.

First, Barn Swallows are beautiful as well as entertaining. Their plumage is dark steel-blue above the buff below. They have a brown forehead and throat. An identifying feature is their sharply forked tail and their swift, acrobatic flying which makes them delightful to watch. They snatch up flying insects, which make up the majority of their diet, and eat certain berries; however they are not a feeder bird. The swallows even drink and bathe while in flight. They are especially attracted to sprinkler systems. The air miles flown **each day** in search of insects for themselves and their babies have been estimated in the hundreds.

Second, I enjoy watching these master builders repair or build from scratch their mud dob nests and line them with straw and white feathers in preparation for their babies to come. Barn Swallows return to the same nesting sights year after year to lay their four or six white eggs spotted with brown. Both parents feed the babies; and because there may be two or more clutches a year, the brothers and sisters eventually join in the feeding process. They are a close family.

Third, observing the development of the hatchlings is a special treat. Most birds build their nests far from the view of humans; however, Barn Swallows seem to delight on “showing off” their young. When the babies “feather out” and are only slightly smaller than their parents, they will turn around in their nest and begin flapping their wings to strengthen them in preparation for that all-important first flight. The parents are close by to encourage them. The young fliers return to the nest at night until the mother bird begins to lay eggs for an additional clutch.

Some folks object to the “droppings” beneath the nest that are located on porches. A few layers of newspaper weighted down by rocks or bricks will protect the porch; the soiled paper can be collected, tossed, and replaced as often as necessary. Quite frankly, I consider the droppings an additional gift for the garden!

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com

Bell County Master Gardeners’ spring plant sale is Sat. March 24, 7:30, AM to 1PM. There will be demonstration booths on Firewise Landscaping, Bee Keeping, Tool Sharpening, Composting, Rainwater Harvesting, Rose Propagation, also Kids Kamp gardening project

