

The Gourd, the Bad, and the Ugly: When is Gourd Use by Purple Martins Bad?

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Home-grown natural gourds have been used for attracting nesting Purple Martins for hundreds, if not, thousands of years. They make excellent and inexpensive nest cavities for martins, but only if modified for the safety of the birds. Below is a list of 13 situations under which the use of natural gourds for raising martins can be bad.

1. When natural gourds are not treated with any type of preservative. The repeated wetting and drying of raw, unpainted gourds will cause them to crack. Always paint the outside of gourds with some form of water-repelling, oil-based paint. The PMCA also recommends soaking gourds in a copper sulfate solution as a "wood" preservative. This prevents rotting.

2. When natural gourds are not painted white. Gourds should be painted white to reflect the heat of the sun. This helps keep the nesting chamber cooler for the nestlings. A glossy white, oil-based paint will work best.

3. When small gourds are used. Martin gourds should be at least 8" in diameter, preferably 10"-12", or even larger. Martins will use gourds smaller than 8", but lay smaller clutches of eggs in them and also have higher mortality rates due to fallout from severe overcrowding of nestlings.



A subadult male Purple Martin feeding a dragonfly to one of its nestlings in an unpainted natural gourd. Natural gourds should be painted white to reflect the heat of the sun. Had this gourd not been 3/4" thick, these babies might have jumped out to escape the lethal heat.

4. When thin gourds are used. Natural gourds should be at least 1/4" thick, but gourds 3/8" to 1/2" thick are the best. The thinner the gourd, the poorer its insulating qualities and the more likely it is to crack.

5. When weather-caused cracks aren't repaired. Should a crack develop, patch it immediately with a quick-drying caulking or spackle. Better yet, throw them out and replace them.

6. When entrance holes are cut too high or too low. Entrance holes in natural gourds that are cut too high allow more rain water to come in. Holes cut too low can allow small nestlings to inadvertently tumble out and perish on the ground. Always test how a gourd hangs

before cutting the entrance hole, then center the cut on an exact vertical face. A metal rain canopy attached permanently about 1" above the top of an entrance hole will help keep a lot

of rain out, even mounted over holes cut a little too high on the curved face of a gourd.

7. When left outside in the weather all winter long and old nests aren't removed between seasons. If old nests are left in a natural gourd between seasons, molds and mildews can grow under the nests and cause the bottom of gourds to rot out. In addition, fleas that attack both nestlings and adult martins can over-winter in there. Bring your gourds down by late August or early September for cleaning and storage.

Wash out the insides of natural gourds with mild soap and water, and also a weak solution of bleach. Store them out of the weather in an outdoor shed.

8. When hung so they can strike each other in the wind. Gourds that are placed so close together that they swing and bump each other, not only can crack, but they also are frequently abandoned by the birds. Space them farther apart. Twenty-four inches on center is optimal.

9. When hung so they twist in the wind. Gourds should be hung so they *swing* in the wind, not *twist* in wind. The compass orientation of the gourd's entrance hole should never change while blowing in the wind. Hanging a gourd so that it is rigid or stationary, and doesn't swing is also perfectly acceptable.

10. When hung on lines stretched between trees. Purple Martins will rarely use gourds hung on lines stretched between two trees. They instinctively know squirrels and other predators can easily reach their nests. Hang them between poles instead, or on specially-designed gourd racks. Make sure these poles or gourd racks are equipped with climbing animal barriers.

11. When drainage holes are not drilled in the bottom of a natural gourd, are too small, too few, or are allowed to get clogged with debris or paint. Inadequate drainage al-

lows gourds to fill with rain, which can soak the nest or drown its occupants. Wet and cold nestlings will often succumb to cold and infection. Using a 3/8" drill bit, drill about 6-8 drainage holes in the bottoms of your natural gourds. Clean the holes out between nesting seasons.

12. When hung in ways that make weekly nests checks difficult or impossible. Gourds should be hung on telescoping poles or (better) winch-operated gourd rack systems, or on lines that can be lowered by pulleys, so that weekly nest

checks can be done. Non-manageable gourd systems should be replaced with ones that can be easily lowered. Don't be afraid to check the nests once a week. Number each gourd with a unique cavity number using a black, waterproof Sharpie or Magic Marker. Keep written records, and participate in the *Purple Martin Conservation Association's* Project MartinWatch, one of their several Citizen Science Projects that martin landlords can participate in. Free nest-check forms are available at their web site (see below). Help them gather data and learn more about these incredible birds. The more hands-on you are with your martins, the more young you will fledge!



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A parent Purple Martin performing nest sanitation by removing a fecal sac from its nest. This is a sure sign there are babies inside. Purple Martins love natural gourds, but they should be painted white and have a rain canopy and screw-off access door added.

A natural gourd, if taken proper care of, can last several decades.

Many martin landlords still grow, use, and love them. However, many martin landlords are now switching to one of the many new styles of plastic Purple Martin gourd proliferating the market. Artificial gourds are ready to hang right out of the box, come with all the latest features, and don't require annual painting and caulking.

James R. Hill, III, is Founder and Executive Director Emeritus of the Purple Martin Conservation Association (PMCA). He has been hosting Purple Martins continuously since 1981. For more information on martins, please contact the PMCA at www.purplemartin.org.

