



## Emil's Innovations Make a Haven for Martins

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Nature takes center stage outside Emil and Betty Pampell's home in a Houston suburb, where Purple Martins, bluebirds, chickadees, woodpeckers, finches, robins, and other feathered beauties visit the houses, feeders and birdbath stationed around the 2-acre property for them. The Pampell's home, built by Emil with the help of other family members, displays their interests and energy inside and out. Betty's quilts adorn many rooms and Emil maintains a large garden for gourds and vegetables. The crown jewels of the Pampell yard, five gourd racks that are home to roughly 200 pairs of martins, sit between the house and garden, in easy view of the patio swing.

A martin landlord since the late 60s, Emil's history with martins began when the Pampells lived in Louisiana, and later followed them to Texas. A 'can-do' kind of person, Emil clearly thrives on thinking about better ways to do things, and likes sharing information and ideas with other landlords. As a member of the Greater Houston Area Purple Martin Association (GHAPMA), Emil is a source of knowledge and encouragement to the group. Says GHAPMA founder Tim Sebesta, "He is our Yoda. I always have him present "how to" segments and bring in the latest housing ideas. He is incredible and an incredible asset. His knowledge, experience and willingness to share his knowledge are unparalleled". [Editor's note: Yoda is a wise and respected teacher in the Star Wars films.] Club member Adam Romain says that if he goes to Emil's for help with one thing, say repairing a broken chair, by the time his family leaves, Emil's also loaned him a sparrow trap and loaded him down with oranges to share with Tim's friends and neighbors. Says Adam, "Emil is a class act. His ideas for martins are quick, easy, and low cost to make."

Emil is an active and helpful participant in the PMCA's online Forum. He shares information on a variety of topics, based on his years of experience and observations of the martins. Says Emil, "The type of housing means very little to a martin, they are only interested in two things: raising babies, and safety; they want to survive. They will use any kind of housing if you provide them with a safe place. If you control starlings and House Sparrows, have your housing in an open area, and provide housing that is protected from predation, including guards on the poles, then your odds increase tremendously regardless of the housing type. My most recent ideas concern the martins' security. When I build a gourd with a side (tunnel) entrance, the martins always build their nest so they cannot be seen from the entrance. I think this is a very important step that has largely been ignored for too many years, and I will continue to try to make the gourds so the owls cannot see the martins. Regardless if you have owls or not, the martins will love that security feature on the housing.

**Entrance holes:** From 1969 until 2004 I used round entrances. It was a constant battle with House Sparrows in the early years, but in recent years, the battle has changed to include starlings. I average about 180 martin pairs, so my colony size is large enough that I can draw some conclusions. The round holes worked well for me for years. Then I switched to SREH two years ago, and there is absolutely no difference in the martins' actions, behavior, or anything else that I noticed. I occasionally put up some round holes to see what will happen. The martins choose a gourd by the location, not by the hole type.

I have never seen any of my martins stuck in a crescent because I round all the corners with a dremel tool. My reason for not wanting round holes any longer is that I don't want to sit



Opposite: Emil & Betty Pampell enjoy a moment on their patio while Spanky wonders when he'll get to chase tennis balls. Above: One of Emil's homemade gourd racks ready for the first birds of 2006. All the gourds are from the garden that can be seen behind the gourd rack. Top right: 8-inch diameter PVC is used for pole guards, and is placed slightly off center to allow the winch handle some turning room. The PVC guards only failed once in many years of use, when a cat managed to get up a pole. Emil now runs electric current to each pole as a guard. Center right: A few bluebirds take a morning splash. Lower right: Emil's unique bluebird houses dot the yard like Grecian columns. He uses 6-inch PVC as the outer shell in tandem with a removeable wooden insert. A few holes drilled in the PVC below the entrance hole give the bluebirds some traction on the way in. When Emil wants to close the house, he rotates the wooden insert to block the entrance hole. The square opening in the insert is the clean-out access. There's no need for an external predator guard, since the PVC works nicely at stopping snakes and raccoons.

*outside watching and guarding my martins seven days a week during all the daylight hours. Even if a person does not see one starling all week, one could show up and destroy a nest of eggs or babies in a minute or two.*

*Sure I hated to change all the entrances on all of my gourds. I also know that progress could never be made at my place if I refused to follow new, better, and safer practices for the martins. Progress comes when new ideas are incorporated into our everyday lives.*





**Top left:** Emil makes inexpensive tunnel entrances from cedar fencing and PVC pipe, then adds an entrance plate. **Top right:** A bird's-eye view of a gourd with an offset tunnel entrance. Emil likes the safety this type of entrance offers against owls or hawks. **Bottom right:** Note the internal section of the tunnel that projects into the gourd. The martins always build around to the side of the tunnel, out of view or reach of the entrance. **Bottom left:** Emil inserts a section of PVC pipe through each gourd to act as a hanging tube. This keeps the inside completely dry and allows him to balance the gourd to offset the weight of the tunnel entrance so it will hang perfectly level.

**Pole guards:** I use 8-inch PVC water pipe that is about 4 ft. long on all my poles. It has worked for me for many years (about 15 years). Recently I have been converting to electric pole guards. The electric fence is the cheapest way to go if you have several poles. I put the electric fence charger at an outlet at my well, and from there I run an underground wire to all of my poles. By running the wire underground, I can mow the yard without moving wires.

The electric fence chargers do not take much power, and if an animal, dog, cat, snake, or child touches it, they get shocked but not injured. Believe me, they remember not to touch it again. I accidentally have touched mine several times, and I don't like it. Also, you can get solar powered electric fence chargers if you don't have power near the poles.

**Gourds:** Hanging and ventilating gourds can be done with a piece of PVC through the neck. Suppose the neck requires a

3-inch piece of PVC to hang the gourd, cut off the top half of the pipe (the part that is inside the gourd). Now the air can go out of the hanging area if there is room. For instance, I use 1/2-inch rebar for the hanging arms on my gourd rack, so if I use 3/4-inch PVC pipe for hanging the gourds, there is enough space there to ventilate the gourd; now I do not need to add an elbow for ventilation. By cutting off only the top half of the PVC, water will not run into the gourd.

A landlord with almost 40 years of experience with martins, Emil is filled with energy that keeps him busy trying new ideas, exploring better ways to house and help the martins. His level-headed thinking and willingness to share ideas with others mark him as someone special. Emil, we're glad you're in the martin 'business' with us. Thank you for all you do to help others.