

GET GROWING

Welcome caped crusaders into the garden

Bats offer us effective, organic pest control, consuming hundreds of mosquitos an hour for free

By LINDA SCARANO

Of all the mammals, none are the least understood or appreciated than bats. As we approach Halloween, images of horrific blood-sucking vampire bats and Count Dracula invade our thoughts.

Contrary to popular belief, bats are clean, gentle and intelligent creatures. They do not prey on humans, tangle themselves into our hair, or even carry rabies more frequently than most mammals.

In fact, bats make wonderful garden guests. Luckily, here in North America, most of our bat species are insectivores that find pesky mosquitoes a great delicacy. With the ever present threat of West Nile Virus, we should be encouraging bats to come into our neighborhoods.

Bear in mind, one little brown bat, can consume hundreds of mosquitoes an hour. These caped-crusaders graciously offer us effective, organic pest control — for free!

BAT BOX

A simply constructed bat box with roosting compartments can shelter up to 100 individual bats.

You can build your own or purchase one. On Staten Island, they're available at Weisner's Nursery in Wil- lowbrook. Prices for a stan- dard size box are around \$25, while the medium-size box is \$50.

If placed near a constant supply of water, a bat house will soon be occupied by many helpful night hunters.

In my own back yard I

have a number of bats that begin zig-zagging across the sky every evening at dusk. I find it quite amusing to watch their unique flight pat- terns.

Did you know a bat relies on sound to determine where and how it needs to move? It does this by emitting a series of ultrasonic pulses through its mouth to search for an in- sect that could be dinner. The sound bounces back to the bat alerting it to the in- sect's presence. This sophis- ticated navigational system is called echolocation.

WING SHAPE

One of the more unusual features of a bat is its wing shape. The bat wing is a thin, yet resilient membrane which resembles a bird's wing in shape, but that is where the similarity ends.

While a bird's hollow bones support delicate feathers, a bat's wing is made of a thin meshwork of muscle strips covered by skin. The bones that support the wing closely resemble a human hand.

A long arm extends out from the body, complete with a wrist; finger bones fan out to form the hand. A tiny clawed thumb hooks out of the top of the wrist, allowing the bat to both crawl and cling.

Interestingly enough, bats may spend over three-quarters of their lives asleep. They slow down their respiration and heart rate as they doze in a trance-like state. For hanging upside down, they have a blood-flow system that works in reverse to humans. They have toes and knees which bend the opposite direction from ours.

PERSECUTED ANIMALS

Despite what we know about their importance to a balanced ecosystem, bats are one of the most relentlessly persecuted animals on earth. You can help them by providing housing, not disturb-



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE/FRANK J. JOHNS

Welcome bats into your back yard with a bat house, like this one at the Staten Island Zoo.

ing them in their roosting spots, and avoiding man-made insecticides.

Planting trees and leaving dead and dying trees standing (where safe), also are good ways to encourage bats to live in your area. Flowers that release scent at night attract insects, which in turn attract bats. You can begin creating your own bat garden simply by planting Sweet Rocket, Moonflower, Evening Primrose, Nicotiana or Soapwort.

Herbs such as chives, borage, mint, marjoram and lemon balm also attract night flying insects. A bat garden

also can include Salvia, Silene, Phlox, Stock and Cornflower.

POLLINATORS

Not only are bats the most important controllers of night-flying insects, they also pollinate and disperse the seeds of valuable fruits, nuts and spices. As a gardener, these are concerns that are of great importance to me.

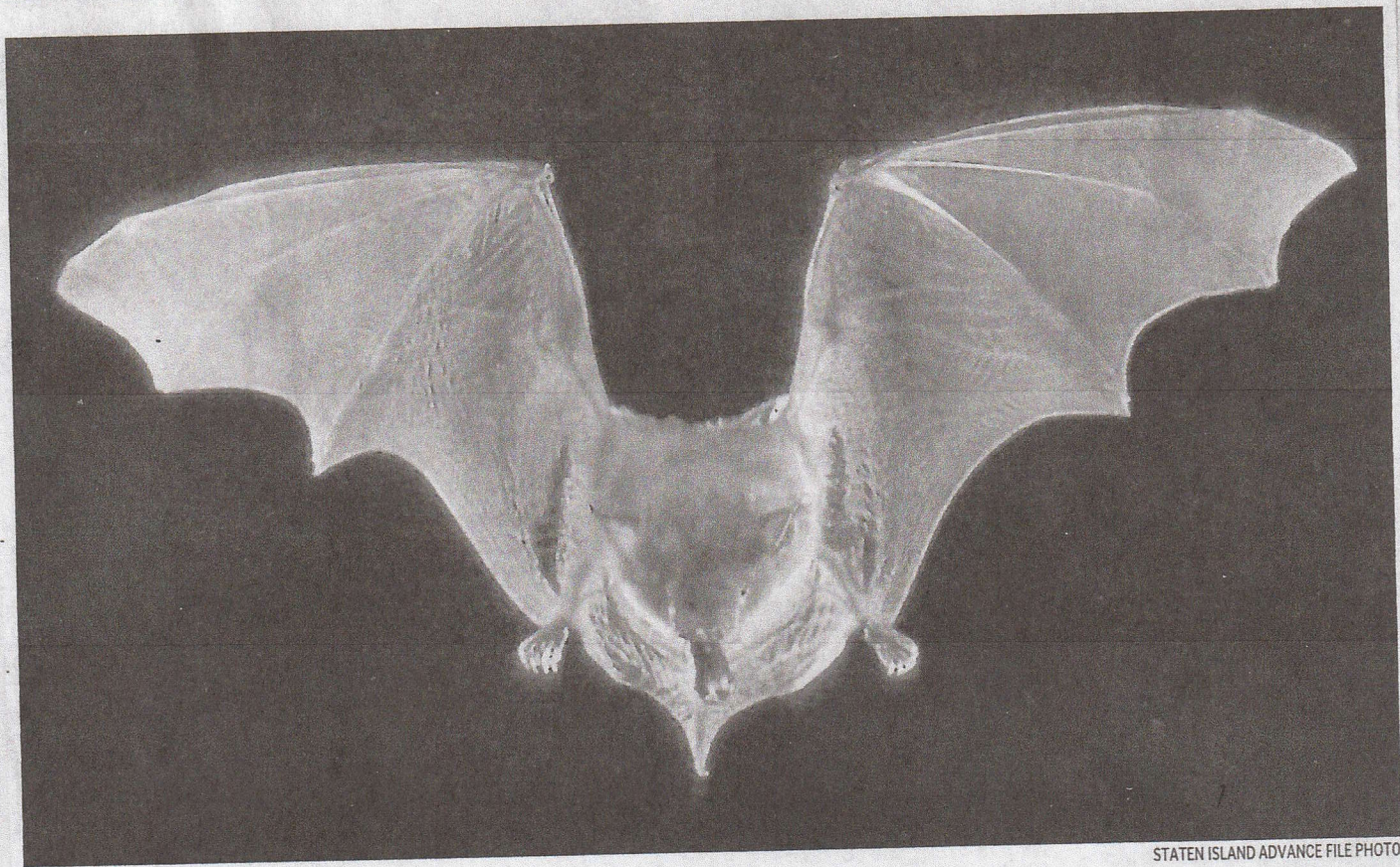
Perhaps, many of the mis-

conceptions about bats are believed because we rarely come in contact with them. By inviting them into your back yard you soon will discover the useful and fascinating habits of "beneficial bats."

GARDEN NOTES

The National Arbor Day Foundation has updated its hardiness zone map. Researchers examined fifteen years of temperature information from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's 5,000 climatic data centers across the country. The result is that changes were made to many areas of the country, moving them up a full zone because of temperature changes over this time period. Staten Island is now generally considered to be in Zone 6.

Linda Scarano is the President of the Great Kills Garden Club which is a member of First District Federated Garden Clubs of New York State.



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE FILE PHOTO

Bats get a bad rap, thanks to vampire movies and popular mythology, but they actually are clean, gentle and intelligent creatures.