

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

The GreenMan



Inviting toads to your abode

Each year, in order to combat an onslaught of creepy, crawling critters, many homeowners spend a small fortune on toxic chemicals, pheromone lures, and even propane-powered mosquito traps. Interestingly, there's a simple solution that's just a short hop (and croak) away.

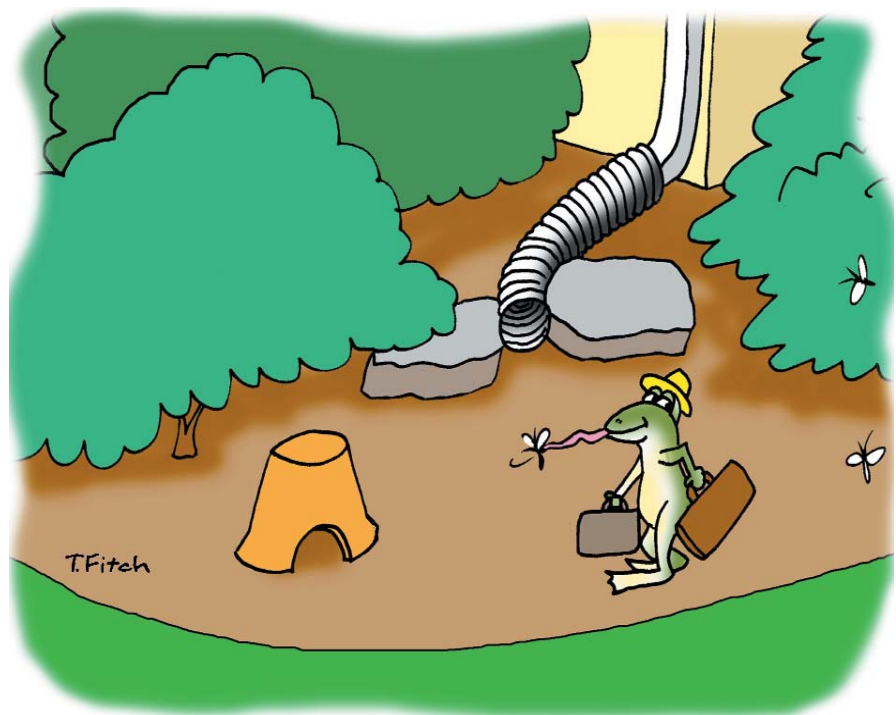
In the world of natural pest control, one of the brightest players is the humble toad. Toads have a phenomenal appetite for insects and other invertebrates that go squish in the night, especially undesirable and rapacious creatures such as slugs, gypsy moths, and tent caterpillars. In fact, up to 90 percent of a toad's diet includes the most common garden pests, such as earwigs, sowbugs (a.k.a. woodlice), millipedes, crickets, a wide assortment of beetles, and otherwise helpful predators like spiders and centipedes. A recent U.S. Department of Agriculture report actually estimated that one adult toad may consume 10,000 pest insects in a 90-day period.

Admittedly, with the possible exception of Mr. Toad of Toad Hall in Kenneth Grahame's 1908 classic, *The Wind in the Willows*, toads fail to gain the respect and appreciation afforded to Kermit the Frog and his amphibious kin - including those strangely popular beer spokes-frogs.

Fables bring us fair maidens kissing frogs and freeing princes from evil spells; the Japanese consider frogs good luck; the French consider them good eating. But toads are simply shunned for fear of transmitting warts. Something needs to be done about this irrational *Bufo*phobia (toads belong to the genus *Bufo*).

There are two species of toads in our area, the most common being the American Toad (*Bufo americanus*), and Fowler's Toad (*Bufo fowleri*). Should you find yourself strolling through a natural area

from spring to mid-summer and hear a good deal of melodious trilling, you're probably listening to the call of the American toad. They actually have a lot to sing about. During the peak reproductive season, from March through July, female toads are briskly busy in shallow pools laying ropy strings and coils containing up to 6,000 individual eggs. Soon after, those eggs will hatch producing ravenous hoards of tadpoles or pollywogs, which will devour mosquito larvae until they emerge onto land as adults.



While not all of the thousands of offspring from thousands of ponds will survive, the numbers of toads moving about our region is truly astonishing. With such a boffo population of bufo available, it is relatively easy to encourage one or more toads to take up residence in your backyard, where they will immediately add your most troublesome pests to their cuisine.

To create your own toad habitat, often called toad abodes, you need only locate a damp location on your property. Sometimes a shady area in the yard, perhaps a natural depression which remains somewhat soggy most of the time, will provide the perfect setting for your toad hall. Alternatively, areas near a downspout or next to the dripping drain from an air conditioning unit will provide a suitably moist environment.

Your toad abode itself allows for plenty of creativity, especially if undertaking this project with children. Personally, I like to recycle old or damaged terracotta pots into habitats. Often, larger clay pots (nine inches or more in diameter) left outdoors during the winter will crack in half. By simply turning each half on its side and slightly burying it in the soil to provide stability, you can create two separate abodes.

Other cracked or chipped pots can be transformed by creating a two-inch high "entrance" at the top edge of the pot. Simply score a semicircular section in the top of the pot and gently tap it out with a hammer. Invert the pot, and toad hall is ready! Children can help with amphibian aesthetics by decorating

the finished pot or potshard with colorful non-toxic paints: perhaps depicting windows, flowers, helpful ladybugs, dancing toads, or other fanciful critters.

Be sure to line the inside of the toad abode with a few handfuls of leaf litter or leaf mold from your compost pile. Toads can hunker down under this cool organic blanket during the hottest days of summer, coming out to feast at night.

For bufophiles willing to invest in upscale - or kitschy -- toad housing, there are numerous on-line sources for wooden, terracotta, and plastic resin toad abodes. Some represent toadstools with columned entryways, ruled over by a toad king and queen, while others represent colorful cottages or barns. One of the most expensive actually looks like an inverted clay flowerpot, of all things!

These toad abode options are primarily fair weather affairs, suitable for spring through fall. To encourage larger resident toad populations, you might want to consider developing a winter palace. Because toads hibernate during the winter, they will need a safe environment in which to snooze away until the world warms up and food becomes available.

A toad hibernaculum can be created using clay drainage tile or even standard plastic drain pipe (four-inch diameter). Starting with one 12 to 14 inch section of pipe or tile, dig a shallow hole in your sheltered, damp garden site and bury the pipe on a 30 degree angle, so that only five inches at the top side of the pipe are exposed. The entryway should be about two to three inches high. Fill

the bottom half of the winter residence with sand, and fill the rest with leaf mold. The toad will use this habitat like any other abode during three seasons, and will climb down deeper under leaves and sand to sleep through the winter.

You can also cover the surface of the hibernaculum with compost during the winter to provide additional insulation against extremely cold temperatures. Clear the surface by March to allow both toad and abode to warm up in the early spring sun.

One final note: toads, like many of the most beneficial inhabitants of our yards and gardens, are sensitive to pesticides and other synthetic chemicals. Your chances of attracting toads to a property featuring only lawn area, or which is treated with lawn and garden chemicals, are extremely low. If you want to encourage natural pest controls, you will need to abandon the toxic alternatives. Mr. Toad thanks you..

You can learn a great deal more about frogs and toads by visiting the popular DEP website: herps.askdep.com.



The GreenMan Show is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be

viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit www.greenmanshow.com.

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