

## Invite a Toad to Dinner

By: Corine Burgess

Do you remember catching toads as a child? Most likely the toad you caught was *Bufo americanus*, the American toad. It is one of the most common amphibians found throughout the United States. American toads breed in ponds and wetlands in the spring and lay strings of eggs in the water. After hatching, the newborns spend a few weeks as tadpoles, then emerge from the water as baby toads. Adult toads spend most of their life away from water, and are most active at dusk and on drizzly days. Take a walk at dusk to do a toad inventory--you might be surprised to find that toads already reside in your backyard.

Why should we care about toads? While they may look short, squat, slow, and generally unworthy of attention, toads will stalk and eat unwanted garden pests. Their tongues dart out to catch flying insects faster than our eyes can follow. One of their favorite meals is the cutworm--that nasty garden demolition expert. Toads also can add a beautiful song to your world. Did you know that all toads and frogs (the toad's more water loving relative) have a different song to communicate within their species, just like birds do? Go outside on a warm, spring night and listen. That is when you will hear toads singing a high-pitched, monotone trill to delineate territories and attract mates.

Ponds and natural wet spots attract toads. If you do not have a natural wet spot, create one with a pie plate or similarly sized dish filled with water. Be sure to place it in a shady spot. Toads seek dim, moist spots during the day. Something as simple as a broken clay pot, placed on its side like a cave, works well for a toad shelter. Or, you can build a structure from piled bricks, rocks, or scraps of wood. Garden centers offer attractive toad homes if you want something more stylish for your amphibian guests. You may want to create a small pond or wetland in your backyard.

If you want to give toads an advantage in your yard, reevaluate the chemical fertilizers and herbicides you use. Some amphibian deformities have been traced to overexposure to certain chemicals. In general, amphibians are having a hard time surviving because of habitat degradation and loss.

But, don't give toads a hard time about warts. The glands behind a toad's eyes are not warts, nor can they give you warts. Those glands secrete a toxin--they are a toad's best defense against predators such as cats and dogs. The toxin irritates the mouths of would-be diners.

Maintaining a natural balance in the backyard is difficult. Amphibians should be considered when trying to achieve balance. Toads can live for several years. Given the right habitat, once they move into your neighborhood, toads are likely to stay for years to come. Support a toad; it may turn out to be a different kind of prince in your natural kingdom.

---

For more information on wildlife habitat, ponds, wetlands, and other Backyard Conservation practices, visit the Natural Resources Conservation Service online at [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov). Or call 1-888-LANDCARE (toll free) for a free colorful Backyard Conservation booklet and tip sheets.