

# AFA Visits...

## Susan Lane's Suburban Flights

by  
Michelle Brucker Millstone  
Tucson, AZ

To many aviculturists, the heart of the Arizona desert might not seem the most likely setting for a suburban psitticine aviary. But Susan Lane has found this to be a very suitable environment. She has created an avian oasis within the confines of her Tucson home.

Floor-to-ceiling glass enclosures, called atriums, are very popular in many homes in the Southwest. They are commonly planted with a variety of foliage, bringing inside a feeling of the outdoors. Susan Lane's general love for animals, along with a desire to add life and beauty to her atriums, sparked the initial interest in our feathered friends.

This new fascination with birds began five years ago with the purchase of a sad-looking mealy Amazon. Gomer, a surgically-sexed female, had been improperly care for, housed in an under-sized cage at the pet store. As a result, she had many problems including minor kidney damage, dirty vent, watery stools and a missing toe. Having had only a budgie as a child, Susan Lane's knowledge about birds was limited. So, with the help of our local zoo veterinarian, Dr. Thomas O. Miller, and considerable reading, a suitable program for housing care was established. Gomer was no longer considered "mean and untrainable" as once thought. She has proven to be a gentle companion, as well as a prolific breeder.

Amidst the comforts of the living room, we find Gomer's four foot wide and seven foot long natural home. This atrium is completely enclosed by glass with a skylight serving as the sixteen foot high ceiling. Access to the atrium is from the hallway, through an open sliding glass door. Only the sliding

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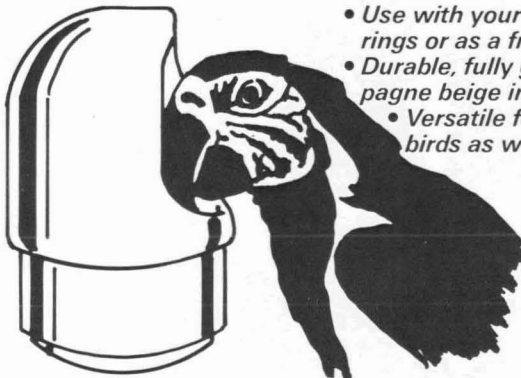
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screen door is secured to prevent Gomer from wandering. Due to its location within the home, this aviary is temperature-controlled with the rest of the house.

The enclosure is planted with non-poisonous foliage located just out of Gomer's reach, along with realistic silk plants, which she does not care to chew. The palo verde and mesquite are Arizona's most commonly found desert trees. The palo verde tree is poisonous, however mesquite is quite good for birds. So, cuttings of mesquite branches were placed throughout the aviary.

Recently Bruce, a male mealy Amazon, was introduced to Gomer. A brown heavy vinyl garbage can decorated to resemble a whiskey barrel was hung at the eight foot level of the atrium to serve as a breeding center. This avian pairing resulted in the first clutch of two. The birds permitted Susan to fondle and tame the babies, all in the familiar surroundings of her own living room.

Two larger atriums adorned with plants can also be viewed from the living room. It, therefore, seemed logical to create another suburban aviary with the addition of beautiful exotic birds.

The second, very spacious glass enclosure measures sixteen feet wide, twenty feet long and ten feet high. Unlike the first atrium, this one is enclosed on three sides by glass and one side by a stucco wall. It is also open to the sky, thus necessitating a secure, yet ventilated covering. This was accomplished by nailing one half inch by two inch wood strips to the studs around the upper periphery of the enclosure. Netting was then attached to the wood strips using u-nails. It was further necessary to cut and resew one corner of the netting to accommodate a 30-foot palm tree. As added protection from the elements, a plastic mesh screen (like those commonly used to protect fruit trees) was placed over one half of the net covering. (Both the netting and screen were purchased inexpensively at a plant nursery.) This covering has lasted five years and has eliminated the need for a supporting center post, which would detract from the overall "natural" appearance.

In preparation for the new birds, a 12 inch square plywood box with three dowel perches was constructed to be used as a sheltered feeding station. It was then hung on the wall at a height of



*A koi pond provides additional dimension to this well planned aviary.*

*The three photos to the top left, center, and bottom give different views and details of the indoor aviary. This is home, complete with a nesting barrel, for a pair of mealy Amazons, Gomer and Bruce.*







*The outdoor aviary is enclosed by three walls of glass and one of stucco.*

five feet from the ground. Two standard cockatiel nesting boxes were hung on the same wall one foot higher. Each box was secured with cement nails and then covered with decorative palm fronds. The aviary was further prepared by hanging wicker finch nests. Also enhancing the natural beauty of the atrium is a recirculating fountain and pond complete with koi (colorful Japanese carp). A filter and infrared light were attached to make the pond and fountain water potable.

The newly equipped enclosure was now ready for avian habitation. Susan began with two pairs of normal cockatiels and six zebra finches. Later button quail and eight hand-fed lutino cockatiels were purchased to add variety and interest.

Since our desert climate is quite

variable, with the cold winter nights falling below 40°F, and the summer days reaching a peak temperature of 110°F, heaters and a water mister were added. The birds disliked the heaters, which were provided for the cold nights, but thoroughly enjoyed the water misters during the heat of summer. The shelter is surely adequate for these birds because of Arizona's infrequent rain, which averages only seven inches per year.

This flight was also quite well suited to breeding. The cockatiels soon produced and reared two gentle and trusting young. The finches followed suit, but multiplied so rapidly that it became difficult to handle them in such great numbers. The youngsters were all unclipped and constantly darted behind obstructions when attempting to catch them for sale. The breeding continued with the button quail using a 12 inch square plywood box decorated with palm fronds and placed on the ground. Additional nesting boxes were also hung on the wall, resulting in even more avian young.

Susan was able to successfully breed in mixed colonies — a truly unusual accomplishment. This was due to the size and location of the shelters and nesting boxes, making the smaller flighted birds inaccessible to our larger clipped friends.

Susan Lane's interest in aviculture continued to flourish as she began to prepare for her newest challenge, the exotic psitticine king, the macaw. First, the finches were sold as pets, since they had become too difficult to catch in this aviary. Fearing what the macaw's powerful beak might do to the ground-dwellers, Susan also found a good home with a well-known breeder for the button quail.

A large three foot wide, four foot deep and three foot high doghouse was purchased and set up on a four foot high plywood base. After the opening was further enlarged and natural perches were added, this new shelter and feeding center was covered with palm fronds. The palm tree was then fitted with a sheet metal chimney to prevent climbing. The glass and stucco walls, as well as the placement of plants made it too difficult for the clipped birds to reach and thus chew on the ceiling netting. The baby flighted birds would bump into the net during their initial trial flights, but soon learned their territory. Susan now feels that if the netting were removed, all the birds would remain in the aviary.

The excitement began as a sexed pair



*Susan's home studio provides space and privacy to pursue her talent as a painter.*

Photos by Bill Plank, Tucson, AZ.





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of blue and gold macaws were introduced to their new home. Two heavy brown plastic garbage cans were placed on the ground for use as nesting boxes. A hole was cut on the side of each can with a wire ladder leading from the hole to a bed of peat and wood shavings. The lids provide for easy access to any young and have not yet been chewed by the birds. This method of nesting macaws was chosen as it has proven successful in Arizona.

The original macaw pair did not seem particularly interested in each other, so the s/s male blue-and-gold was sold as a pet to an approved home, and an s/s male scarlet was purchased. Although eggs have not yet been produced, this pair appears to have taken a serious interest in the ground nest box. Considering Susan Lane's current record of breeding success, the same outcome is expected with the macaws.

The care, feeding habits and taming of birds are daily priorities with the serious aviculturist. Susan Lane tames each of her own birds using the "perch-taming" method, while offering an abundance of kindness and reassurance.

After the wings are clipped, a new bird is taken into the sunken bathtub and placed on a dowel. (The bird prefers the dowel to the slick surface of the bathtub.) Using comforting words and food treats, Susan walks the bird around the bathtub until he feels comfortable. He is then introduced to a larger room. If the bird hops off the dowel, he is taken back into the bathtub to begin again. Depending on the bird, this taming process can take from 15 minutes to three hours, and even works well with nervous, biting birds.

When the bird is used to moving about on a dowel, a closed-fisted bare arm is substituted. The wandering continues while gradually attempting to scratch (or pet) the bird's tummy and head. With a reassuring voice and calm manner, even the most difficult birds become a delight after a month of this routine.

If a bird ever attempts to bite, a firm "no" is given, along with a distraction using the other hand. Susan then reminds us that psitticines use their beaks as a third foot. So, give them a chance to "climb" on you using this "third foot", and then allow them to explore your arm with their sensitive tongue.

Proper nutrition is another major concern of avian caretakers. Their daily diet includes a combination of dry food and fresh fruits and vegetables, in order to meet their feeding needs. Commer-

cial oil and vitamin-coated, hulled seed mix containing no sunflower seeds is placed in a flat clay dish along with dry dog food. Another clay dish holds freshly washed spinach, corn, beans, carrots and peas. A variety of fresh fruits are also offered in the same dish, each grouped separately. These fruits include apples, oranges, bananas, strawberries, grapes, pears and blueberries. Peanut butter, rice and cheese add additional protein. (It was noted that the addition of cheese to the diet resulted in fewer in-shell deaths among chicks.) The fruits and vegetables were finally sprinkled with nutritious wheat germ. Ceramic crocks filled with fresh water are also offered at the feeding stations.

Careful attention is paid to the cleanliness of the feeding areas as well as the entire aviary. Each day, all food and water cups are washed in hot water and dried. This is followed by weekly cleansing in soap and bleach water.

Since the atriums are plumbed for planting, maintenance is fairly simple. The smaller indoor aviary floor is covered with plain clay kitty litter. Each day droppings and uneaten food are gathered using a disposable plastic glove. Once a week, an atomizer with a mild bleach solution is attached to a hose and the entire enclosure is washed down, the glass is cleaned and new kitty litter is added. The larger exposed atrium is cleaned in the same manner with its earthen rock-covered bottom turned weekly.

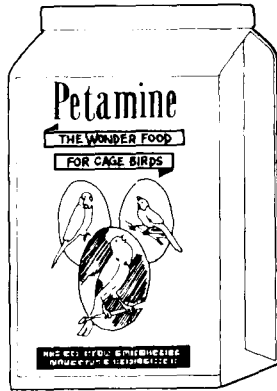
Since concrete surrounds the base of each atrium, rodents have never been a problem. But, a cockatiel was lost unexpectedly after being bitten by a poisonous spider indigenous to this area. Commercial mite spray is now used to rid these pests, with no harm to the birds.

Needless to say, Susan is kept quite busy with her most recent hobby. But this 33 year old wife and mother of two boys still finds time to enjoy cooking, play the accordion, as well as painting and selling portraits of exotic psitticines. (The third atrium was converted to a studio and gallery for this purpose.)

We can now see why Susan Lane's aviaries are unique. When people think of birds as messy, uncaring creatures, they need only see the natural beauty within the Lane's home. From this we can conclude that neither acreage nor vast flights are necessary to pursue an avicultural interest. An average city lot, along with some acquired knowledge and a sincere fondness for these marvelous species, is all that is required to enjoy a suburban avian paradise. ●

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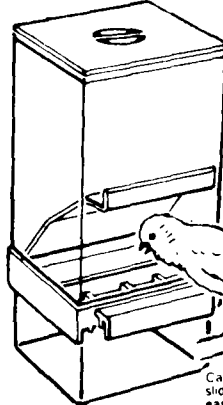
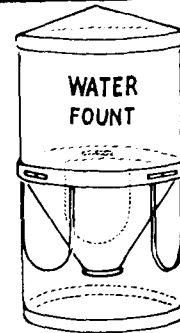
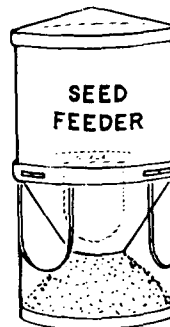


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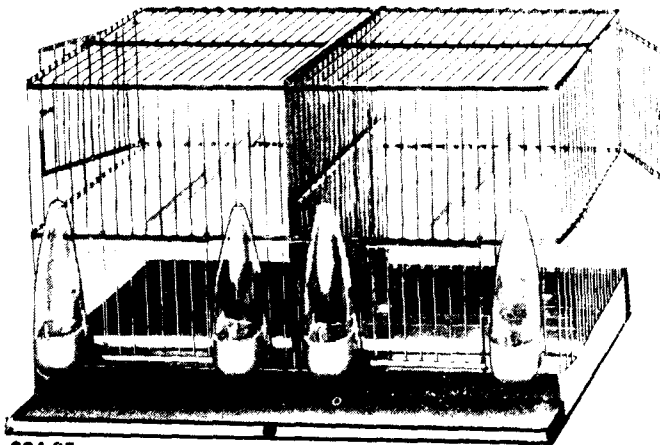
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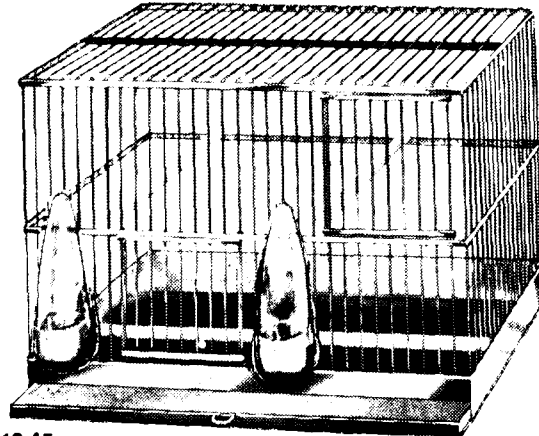
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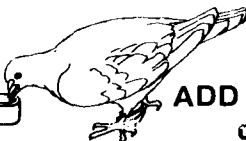
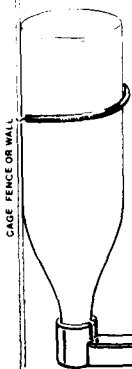
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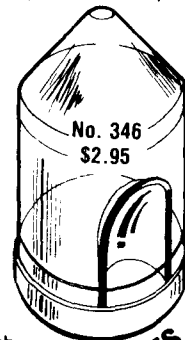
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