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In Your Garden Don't Bad Mouth Bees

by James A. Fizzell

Those pesky "bees" so abundant now probably aren't bees at all. More than likely, they are small wasps called yellowjackets. These wasps are somewhat more slender than honey bees, about 1/2 inch long, smooth, with black and yellow stripes. Honeybees are plump, somewhat fuzzy, and brown and yellow in color.

Yellow jackets are perfectly happy to exist in close proximity to humans. They make large paper nests in cracks in the ground in our yards, in wall voids, or any other protected place they can find. And, they eat just about anything we eat. Thus, they enjoy our picnics just about as much as we do. It is not uncommon to find one between you and your hamburger just before you take a bite.

Unfortunately yellowjackets are quite aggressive, and unlike a bee which can sting only once, can sting repeatedly.

To reduce the chance of being stung outdoors, avoid wearing bright colors that might be confused for flowers on which the wasps also feed. Also, certain colognes attract the pests.

Keep all the food at your picnic covered until just before eating, and eat quickly. Then cover all food and dispose of leftovers etc. promptly, some distance from where you will be sitting.

If you do receive a sting, expect it to be uncomfortable for a few days, but unless you are unusually sensitive to stings, there should be no permanent effect.

Yellow jackets spend the winter as adult females. In spring they start building their paper nests and raising grub-like young.

The young are fed insects and bits of meat, fruit or any other food. They scavenge from garbage cans, picnics, or other areas where food is left uncovered. When they mature into adult wasps they join their sisters in raising more young.

Late summer finds these pests in greatest number as they try frantically to feed their developing young to adulthood before winter kills off the nest.

Since the nests will not survive the winter there is no need to destroy them unless they are located where you will regularly encounter them, risking stinging.

If you find it necessary, elimination of nests is best done at night when the yellowjackets are less active. Be sure to wear protective clothing so that as little skin as possible is exposed to possible stings.

Underground nests will usually have a single opening that the wasps use to enter and leave the nest. Soak the nest with diazinon sprayed through this hole. Seal the opening with soil immediately after spraying.

Wall void nests are frequently a foot or more from the wall opening that the wasps use to enter and leave the nest. These nests can usually be killed by placing carbaryl (Sevin) dust in and around the wall opening. The yellowjackets pick up this dust on their bodies, groom themselves with their mouthparts, and feed each other in the nest. Often the dust must be reapplied up to 4 times over a two week period to kill all of the wasps in the nest. There is no honey in these nests so there is no need to remove them from inside the wall. Nests are not re-used in subsequent years.