



What's All the Buzz About?

Wasps and bees are beneficial insects, but they get a bad reputation because they can sting. Here's how to tell who is who and avoid getting stung.

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Above: Bald-faced hornets are black with white markings. They are one of the largest wasps and can be quite aggressive when their nests are disturbed.

Not everything that buzzes in your garden is a “bee.” One of the biggest concerns for many is whether these insects will sting. Being stung is most likely when you disturb their nests or make an extra effort to provoke them. Stinging insect identification is actually relatively easy. There are both visual and behavioral cues that can help you determine who is buzzing in your garden!

Wasps and bees are beneficial insects, but have a bad reputation because of their ability to sting. Honeybees play a vital role in pollination for all kinds of fruits and vegetables, including commercial agriculture. Wasps and hornets may be a nuisance when nesting around homes, but they feed abundantly on all sorts of insect pests.

'Bee' Careful!

Honeybees are hairy, with black and yellowish-brown coloration. Since they gather and feed on flower pollen and nectar, they commonly are not aggressive and are unlikely to be the bothersome culprits at picnics.

Bumblebees are much larger than honeybees, and can be quite colorful with their black and yellow bodies. Like honeybees, they are excellent pollinators and spend most of their lives visiting flowers and usually show no interest in humans or their food. However, bumblebees can sting, but rarely do so unless provoked.

Carpenter bees are often confused with bumblebees, but they have shiny, hairless black abdomens instead of furry ones. While bumblebees tend to live underground, carpenter bees drill almost perfectly round holes for their nests in wood walls, doors and window frames. Bumblebees keep to the flowers, but male (drone) carpenter bees are well known to buzz around your head if you get too close to their nest. This is annoying, but not dangerous, since male bees have no stingers. Only the female has a stinger, and she stays with the nest, only stinging if threatened.

Wasps Can Be Annoying

In general, wasps can be distinguished from bees by their slender smooth bodies and narrow waists. In flight, the legs of a wasp tend to trail down behind it. There are many different kinds of wasps, with differing appearances and habits. Many are predators and are considered beneficial because they feed on common garden pests, such as caterpillars. Yellow jackets, bald-faced hornets and paper wasps are the most common types of wasps encountered by people, and make their nests from a papery pulp comprised of chewed-up wood fibers mixed with saliva. Their nests are usually in quiet, out-of-the-way places. Unfortunately, in the home setting this may conflict with people and their activities.

The most common wasps are yellow jackets, accounting for the majority of stinging incidents. Often mistaken for honeybees, yellow jackets have smooth bodies with distinctive bands of bright yellow and black. With bees, you may see yellow pollen sacks on their back legs, but not on yellow jackets. Yellow jackets fly rapidly side to side prior to landing. Their preferred food is other insects, such as caterpillars, and fruit. However, when these natural food sources begin to decrease in late summer and fall, they become a nuisance pest. They are attracted to meaty or sugary odors, and are an annoyance around uncovered garbage cans and at outdoor gatherings. Unlike bees, yellow jackets are aggressive and are free to sting you as many times as they want without injury to themselves.

Paper wasps construct the familiar, open-celled paper nests we often see suspended from eaves or porch ceilings. Though paper wasps are beneficial insects, they tend to nest in close proximity to people, putting us at risk for stings. If a nest is near an entrance to your home, or on a porch or deck, you may need to control paper wasps to minimize such risk. Wait until evening, when the wasps have settled in for the night, to treat or remove the nest. Spray the nest with commercial wasp spray, but never stand directly under it while applying — the wasps may drop from the nest and you also risk getting exposed to the pesticide. Removal of large nests or nests inside homes or structures should be handled by professionals.

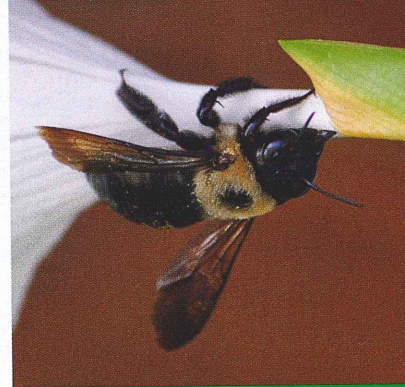
It is best to tolerate or avoid these familiar insects, since bees provide a valuable service as pollinators, and wasps as voracious predators of garden pests. Most wasps, like bees, are social insects and will vigorously defend their homes if disturbed. However, if they are bothersome to you and your family due to the location of their nest, removal or treatment might be necessary. Just “bee” careful! 🐝

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Bodies of honey bees are hairy, making them good pollinators.

Carpenter bees look very similar to bumble bees but have shiny hairless black abdomens instead of furry ones.



In late summer and early fall, yellow jackets are attracted to sugary odors such as this rotting pear.



Bumblebees are much larger than honeybees, and quite colorful with their black and yellow bodies.



Tips to Avoid Bee and Wasp Stings

- Don't smell or look like a flower — avoid using scented products or wearing floral prints while working in the garden.
- Take care when eating outdoors — sugary foods and drinks attract bees and wasps. Move trash cans away from eating areas, and delay serving your picnic until ready to eat.
- Don't walk barefoot — bees may be visiting clover blossoms in your lawn, and some stinging insects nest in the ground.
- Rinse and keep garbage or recycling containers covered — wasps are especially attracted to empty beverage containers and fruit scraps.
- Watch out for them — wait for them to move on before dead-heading or doing other gardening tasks. Enjoy them from a distance!