



Sallie Lee
Urban Regional Extension Agent
News Release

Use hummingbird basin style feeder without yellow plastic flowers to deter wasps and bees

Question: I have hummingbird issues. My “hummers” showed up this spring, stayed for a few days, and then I didn’t see them for weeks. Now, some have returned but my feeders have been taken over by wasps and bees; they’re chasing the hummingbirds away from their food. Why did they apparently disappear, and what can I do to keep wasps and bees from harassing them now that they’re back?

Answer: As tiny as they are, hummingbirds have always seemed a bit mysterious; they dart like feathered jewels through our summers, depart sometime in the fall, and magically reappear sometime around April. There seem to be a number of ‘early bird’ hummers each year, those that brave late freezes, snowstorms, and the like in exchange for staking their claim on prime mating territory. According to some ‘hummer hunters,’ the spring appearance of the bird is limited by availability of active insects, not by blooming flowers. This spring was a wet one, which meant some insect populations were higher than others. As hummingbird expert Bob Sargent is quoted as saying, “Hummers need nectar to power the bug eating machine that they are.” For protein and other nutrients, they eat soft-bodied insects and spiders. Nectar is the ‘sugar high’ that provides the energy to catch bugs. That nectar need is what makes hummers such captivating visitors to our feeders.

The answer to why just a few hummers showed up then disappeared may have been insect and/or weather related; since they don’t migrate in flocks but rather on an individual internal clock, it’s quite possible the first few birds may have started nesting by the time the rest arrived. Of greater concern is the loss of wildflowers as food source; that may have a much deeper impact than effects of weather. Regardless, there are hummers back in the area, so put out your feeders and keep nectar fresh, especially in this heat.

As for keeping bees and wasps out of the hummingbird feeder; there are several approaches to this situation. Hummingbirds didn’t see man-made feeders until the late 1940s, or early 1950s, so they are a recent development on the hummer scene. They learn to use them by watching other hummers, and through their own natural nosiness. If you’ve ever seen a hummingbird approach a large red tractor to check out its nectar-producing qualities, you can only imagine what must be going through that small feathered head! But hummingbirds do learn to associate feeders with “goodies,” and if they appear to prefer one style over another, it’s probably because they are

more familiar with one style than another. Changing feeders won't drive them away but they may take a few days to get accustomed to a new style.

Since hummingbirds will approach any type of feeder as long as nectar is fresh, buy one that is easy on the upkeep. Perches are usually not preferred by photographers since they get better pictures of hovering birds, but perching saves calories for hummers, so consider that in your purchasing deliberations.

One of the best styles of feeders for keeping uninvited critters such as bees and wasps from being pests is a style that doesn't have yellow plastic flowers around the openings, since bees and wasps are attracted to the color yellow. If your feeder has yellow flowers, try removing them or when taking the feeder down for the season, paint the flowers red **before** hanging the feeder up next spring.

Denying bees and wasps access to the syrup is the best defense. Feeders come in two main designs: inverted bottle or basin. Basin feeders are usually better at keeping bees and wasps away since the syrup level is too low for insects to reach, but is in range of hummingbird tongues. Several companies make basin feeders; check online or try a local store that sells bird supplies. If you decide not to replace that wonderfully ornate feeder that was a gift from great aunt Mathilda, try moving the feeder just a few feet. Insects are not the brightest bulbs in the box, and may not find its new location, while the hummers usually won't flap a wing over the move. If that doesn't work, remove the feeder for a day or two; you may see hummers working the area for their 'treat station,' but they will still be looking after wasps and bees have given up the chase.

If you find that keeping a hummingbird feeder at the required cleanliness level is not your cup of tea, or you travel too much and don't want to have that concern, a hummingbird garden is another alternative to the feeder. Plans and plants for hummingbird gardens are readily accessible online; type in "hummingbird garden, southeast USA" for plans and plants that work in our area.

For hummingbirds, the color red works in flowers as well as feeders. Most hummer watchers decry the use of red food coloring in the syrup mixture which is 4 parts water to 1 part sugar, and absolutely do not use honey in the feeder – it can develop a fungus that is fatal to the hummers.

For more information regarding hummingbirds, feeders, gardens, and habitats please contact Sallie Lee, Urban Regional Extension Agent at the St. Clair County Extension office by calling (205) 338-9416 or email leesall@aces.edu. You can also go online or check out books at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens Library.



Inverted [bottle] feeder



Basin or saucer feeder