

TIMELY INFORMATION

Agriculture & Natural Resources

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Carpenter bees are demanding actions

Xing Ping Hu, April 14, 2010

Several questions about carpenter bees start coming in this time of year (later spring – early May).

This might be called the swarming season of carpenter bees which are foraging, mating, and producing.

The ones buzzing around and with a white/light yellow spot on front head are males, they are aggressive but harmless, simply collecting pollens.

Where are they most likely to nest?

Eaves, window trim, facial boards, siding, wooden shakes, decks, outdoor furniture, and sometimes fence.

What damage do they do in the swarming season?

After mating, the females burrow into wood, mostly borrow old or abandoned tunnels, to lay eggs with a series of small cells. Each cell is provisioned with a ball of pollen, this is why you see them come in and out of the holes frequently before the holes are sealed. Each ball of pollen serves one larva. It is easy to identify the holes made by carpenter bees: they are round and slightly larger than the diameter of a pencil or about the diameter of a dime. Such the damage is done to the wood, and the damage can be considerable if the wood has been utilized for nesting year after year.

What kind of wood they do not like to burrow into?

No wood is immune, but painted or pressure treated wood is much less susceptible to attack. In another word, they prefer to attack wood which is bare, weathered and unpainted. Painting all exposed wood surfaces provide protection, to certain degrees.

Wood stains and preservatives are less reliable than painting, but will provide some degree of repellency versus bare wood.

How to control them?

Mechanical methods: If there are only a few hovering around, and you would like an alternative way of excising, you may catch them with an insect net, or knock them out of the air and killed them with a tennis racket.

Chemical methods: Liquid sprays of carbaryl (Sevin), chlorpyrifos (Dursban, it has been phased out but the stocks of this product can still be used), d-Limonene (Motherearth ProCitra-DL), chlorfenapyr (Phantom), or a synthetic pyrethroid (e.g., permethrin or cyfluthrin), and all pesticide labelled for control dry-wood termites can be applied as a preventive to wood surfaces which are attracting bees.

Residual effectiveness of these insecticides is often only 1-2 weeks, however, and the treatment may need to be repeated because carpenter bees are active during the entire late-spring and early summer.

Tunnels which have already been excavated are best treated by puffing an insecticidal dust (e.g., 5 percent carbaryl, Perma-Dust, crusader duster, Drione dust) into the nest opening. Aerosol sprays labeled for wasp or bee control also are effective.

Do not plug the holes immediately, but leave the holes open for a few days after treatment to allow the bees to contact and distribute the insecticide throughout the nest galleries.

Then plug the entrance hole with a piece of wooden dowel coated with carpenter's glue, or wood putty, or simply caulk seal the holes. This will protect against future utilization of the old nesting tunnels and reduce the chances of wood decay.

Caution: make the treatment at night when the bees, the females, are not active and wear protective clothing to avoid attack. Females are the ones often hovering around and guarding the holes during the day and will sting when being handled.