



Season 1 Episode 6—Buzzing Carpenter Bees

March 20, 2026

Announcer

Welcome to the *Southern Ground* podcast provided by Alabama Extension through Auburn University. Extension educators Shane Harris and Dr. Chip East discuss seasonal lawn and garden topics, address common questions, and provide the practical solutions you want to know. Let's dig in to our southern ground.

Shane Harris

Hello everyone, and welcome to the *Southern Ground* Podcast. I'm Shane Harris and joining with me is Chip East. And we're both from the Extension service here in Alabama with the Auburn University. And we're glad you could be part of this podcast as we are here to address some seasonal topics. Answer some of the common questions we've had over the years.

Shane Harris

And as we do this recording of this podcast, it is a beautiful spring day, here in the middle of the March, at least a tease of spring. And so that's going to sort of reflect and what the topics are going to be today, Chip.

Chip East

Yes. Shane. They've already been buzzing around my house.

Shane Harris

Carpenter bee the buzz of carpenter bees. And I saw one just a couple weeks ago for the it was actually late February. It may have been the last day of February, the earliest I can remember. But when those carpenter bees come out on a beautiful, warm, sunny day, to me that's always the sign of spring. Is coming.

Shane Harris

Or at least a tease of spring weather is here.

Chip East

Well, it is the old bee comes with a little bit of problems though is there is an issue with that and I have remember those days are hitting those things with the I actually made just getting old board and hitting them. But I actually made paddles just for the carpenter bee management, Shane. And it provided hours of fun.

Shane Harris

Yeah, we're reflecting on our childhood. So as we grew up and we grew up in the age of the, the late 70s and early 80s, and so mom always sent us outside on a pretty day. And so we got our education by learning about the flowers and the butterflies and catching and learning about the carpenter bees buzzing back and forth.

Chip East

Yeah. And, well, I made, my nephew's paddles Shane so they can join in on the fun I had when I was younger.

Shane Harris

That was called our entertainment.

Chip East

Well, we didn't have the Nintendo Switch back then, and.

Shane Harris

Or the PlayStation 5 or 6, whatever is out right now. We did have the Atari, but.

Chip East

This was the entertainment.

Shane Harris

The entertainment was getting outside. And I think that attributes to our career today, because we were made to go outside and learn and spend time outside and learn about the the trees and the birds and the snakes and the insects. So, the carpenter bees were some of those insects that you collected very easily the first time, and you learn about which ones to catch and which ones you cannot catch.

Chip East

Well, that's right. And you know, there's male and female on those that have. I'll say they have a white face if you can look at the males and they don't sting. So, they could be caught. Now the females can sting. They normally do not, but I wouldn't tell somebody they wouldn't sting because they certainly can.

Shane Harris

What Chip's referring to is those males that do seem to have the white face or a white, the cream type nose. Those are the ones that are hovering around on the edge of the porch. There's they're buzzing back and forth, tend to a chase, a female, they're maybe hovering around a flower. They seem to be very territorial.

Shane Harris

And that's when you. They seem to be menacing. Try to scare you off, because this is my spot. They would chase other males that came in the area. But we soon learned as a young boys that, hey, they're not too. There's more, bark to their stinging, and we could catch those rascals. These carpenter bees are good pollinators, and some people mistake them as bumble bees.

Shane Harris

They're not bumble bees, but they are one of the largest groups of native bees that we have in the United States, most on the east side and the west side of the United States. But here, here in this, the Deep South, they're very common.

Chip East

If I could brag on them, I'll say they can pollinate, but they do a lot of damage. And it's not my favorite bee.

Shane Harris

As I mentioned, these carpenter bees do resemble bumble bees, but they're about an inch and a half long, and they have more of a blue-black abdomen that sort of shiny. They don't look exactly like bumble bees, like we may have in other parts of the country.

Chip East

Insects have three body sections. There's a head, thorax and abdomen. The abdomen is the rear end. And on the bumblebee, their abdomen can be hairy. On the carpenter bee, their abdomen is shiny and that's one way to tell them apart.

Shane Harris

There's a very big distinction between where you would find them. The bumble bees, I think, live in the ground where you can find these carpenter bees coming out of the wood or hovering over flowers.

Chip East

That's correct. The bumble bees. I do like these carpenter bees are not my friend.

Shane Harris

They definitely can be a pest.

Chip East

Again, it's a lot of fun. Now the problem is, I just thought it was fun. Well, the problem is they can do a lot of damage. Back then I wasn't thinking about the damage they were doing to a building. And I think about it in a different way today than as a kid. And it is not something you want.

Chip East

We answer a lot of questions about it. It's not the easiest place to manage.

Shane Harris

They have the ability to bore into wood and like I said, cause a lot of sawdust, a lot of holes and eventually some long-term damage.

Chip East

You'll, you might start seeing the sawdust to start with. And they're not eating the wood like a termite might. They're just getting it out of the way so they can make a gallery to lay their eggs. So, they. If I could say the word, they. It's like a drill. They're drilling in it. It's like a half inch diameter hole that they drill in, and they can reuse them from year to year or two.

Chip East

They don't. They can drill more, but it's easy to reuse what's already there. But they'll go in, lay an egg, put some nectar there for the larva as it develops. Then they'll seal that off. Lay another egg. So, one gallery or one hole could have several chambers. Your numbers can grow pretty fast when you're expanding that much at a time.

Shane Harris

And that's where a lot of them are coming out of those galleries from last year, they overwintered in there. And most of that damage is caused by the female. And then we'll see the males sometimes go in those holes, but it's the female that's doing most of the work, and it's the male that's mostly doing the hovering around to chase the females.

Chip East

That's right. Again, with the damage, the bee can do the damage. They're laying the eggs in these holes. But when that larva is in there, I have trouble with the woodpecker will come and pick into the wood to get the larva. And you think, well, that's biological control. Well it is. But that woodpecker will do. I feel like more damage than the bees.

Chip East

So, we've got some added damage to our issue. And if it's even if it's an old barn. But I certainly want it on the eve of the house or anything like that, I would want to do something about it if it was in my house.

Shane Harris

That's where you tend to see the most often is around old buildings. Typically, they like weathered wood. If it's painted or varnished, it may be somewhat of a turret of overtimes. Boy they love cedar. They love cedar houses, too. About growing up, I remember an old cedar tree. It looked like a carpenter bee, an apartment or condo because there was so many holes.

Shane Harris

There was so much activity just around that old cedar tree. But as you go walk around springtime, you see around flowers. You see them around old buildings. You see. I've seen them, drill into wooden benches, the eaves of the house, back porch, the deck. There's all kinds of places, any type of way to expose whether wood is a place for them to bore in.

Chip East

And you bring up a good point. If we could, paint or varnish the wood. But a lot of people don't like that. They want the natural color or whatever. But if we could paint it or varnish it, that would deter them. I'm not saying it to eliminate, but that is one. If your porch needs painting anyway, I'd go ahead and paint it.

Chip East

That's one thing that helps, but there's no nothing we can do to treat and then never have to treat again. So, it's one keep it painted, keep it varnish. That's important. But then we can come back with some insecticide and a lot of the liquids that we spray, the sunlight breaks it down. I mean that's what it does outside.

Chip East

So, we got to retreat. Something that helps instead of a liquid is we use a carbaryl makes a powder. And years ago we'd call it seven dust. Sometimes you'll see seven in it, the trade name. And it might have something else in it. So just carbaryl. You can still buy as a dust. That dust clings to them.

Chip East

And it, it to me works better. And if we could I say puff it. I've done different things. Applying it is hard. I won't lie about that. That's. It's aggravating. It's far easier to spray than it is to dust. But if we could dust in these holes and give it a couple of days for the insects to, to come out or die, or get it on them and spread it somewhere else, that would be very beneficial.

Shane Harris

You mentioned this contact insecticide. You can't just start chasing them as they buzz by with a spray can or other type of insecticide, you got to make contact. So, by putting it in the in those holes it's in the wood where they're overwintering. Or are they going back into

Chip East

That's going to be the best place. You know, we talked about hitting them with a paddle and it is a lot of fun, but you're really not going to manage your pest problem by hitting them. And that's something we can do. That'd be an organic method.

Shane Harris

Yeah. Pay the kids. Hey, we use tennis rackets. We use badminton rackets. Or you try to floss swatters, but they're typically too small. It's one of those things that you hate to eliminate them because they are good pollinators in their place. But when the population does build up, it does cause a lot of damage.

Chip East

They can do thousands of dollars worth of damage. And that's the problem. And so yes, you can swat them, but that doesn't it's going to be very difficult to get all of them doing that method.

Shane Harris

Chip. Another innovative method to control carpenter bees are these wooden carver bee traps that we've seen folks build and use the last few years. They sort of look like a small birdhouse, but it has a tiny hole. It has a clear plastic bottle attached to the bottom. It seems carbon bees are curious about this small hole and will go into the box, but as they're looking for a way to get out, they're lured to the sunlight and they become trapped in the plastic bottle.

Chip East

It will catch them. I'm not. That's true. But it doesn't do a good enough job that I wouldn't treat in some other manner. Stain or Polyurethane is where I'd start with using the a dust of carbaryl. And then the hard part, Shane, you can tell them about that. Fill in the holes when we're done. It's super hard.

Chip East

It's people have put dowel rods and you're just wanting to block that interest so we can put wood putty, dowel rods, cork if you have access to that. But if there's some thousands of holes we need to make thousands or fill thousands of holes. And because they'll reuse the gallery, that's the only way that really cuts down on the number is to fill in these holes.

Chip East

And that takes a lot of time.

Shane Harris

With integrated pest management. And we make those recommendations for regard of the pest. It may be this is an issue with homeowners or farmers or even landowners. You got to do multiple approaches. So, if you can go out there and use a tennis racket to eliminate them a few that way that are buzzing around the house, put

the insecticide in those holes to try to eliminate future colonies being built up as a as she lays the eggs, exclusion would be a method would be to try and doing the painting, or even having to put siding on some of your house in some places, other than having to replace the wood.

Shane Harris

So, with any kind of a pest, you have to do multiple methods. And even with this, you're not really going to make a big dent in the population. We've seen those controls. We've seen that had on their own properties. Yet they they come right back in large numbers the following spring, don't they.

Chip East

If we do not plug the holes, they certainly will. So, we need to treat and then plug the hole and they're still coming back. But you'll have lower numbers of them. I mean it's like fire ants or any kind of pest we don't treat one time and never again. We don't get a haircut one day and never have to cut your hair again.

Chip East

It's a continuous thing that we have to manage.

Shane Harris

Yeah, we weren't on this podcast just to address not only the control methods, but also a little of the background and biology. With these carpenter bees, they're definitely the sign of spring. A favorite insect, that we have. But like a lot of insects, they, they have their issues that can cause a problem.

Chip East

I will add a less toxic, alternative to like, Carbaryl or that Sevendust would be to use boric acid. Takes a little longer to work, but that's something that can certainly be done.

Shane Harris

Chip, it's definitely springtime, and because the bees are buzzing, especially those carpenter bees buzzing around the house and unfortunately may be causing some damage this year.

Chip East

That's right, Shane, and the damage can be expensive. I hope you learned something about the carpenter bees you didn't know, and if you have any other questions about carpenter bees or or actually many other topics, you know, just give us a call at your local Extension office. There's a lot of information online that you can look at, and we're always a phone call or text away.

Shane Harris

We appreciate you. Listen to *Southern Ground*. We look forward to you tuning in as we get dig deeper into other, other topics. This podcast again, is, for, you know, your entertainment before your education, too, as we

address some of those common calls that we have over the years, as warmer weather gets here, we hope to to bring you to some more deeper topics, that you will benefit from listening and be part of.

Shane Harris

Chip, always great to have you, look forward to the next podcast as we dig deeper to other, other issues.

Chip East

Absolutely, great to be on *Southern Ground*.

Announcer

Southern Ground has been a production of Alabama Extension at Auburn University.