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Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens

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“Ground-Nesting Bees and Wasps”

Help!! I have bees swarming my yard! Each week our office receives several distressed calls from people who encounter some of our local ground-nesting bees and wasps for the first time. My goal is to convince you that these are actually “good bugs” that are out busy doing their job as pollinators or serving as useful predators in controlling other harmful insect pests. However, when ground nests are located in areas such as yards, gardens, flower beds or playgrounds, most clients would rather not hear a discourse in entomology.

There are more than 3,500 species of solitary bees in North America! The most common ground-nesting bees and wasps that we see in this area include bumble bees (those “giant” ones), sweat bees, digger bees, leafcutting bees, digger wasps, and cicada killer wasps. All of these ground-nesting bees are curious and investigate persons and pets near their burrows. This is probably what you would do if someone was walking onto your front porch, right? Generally, these bees do not present a stinging hazard and do not defend their nest territory aggressively—unlike their yellow jacket and honey bee cousins who are more easily provoked. With the exception of yellow jackets, most ground nesting bees and wasps are solitary, which means only one female works and lives alone in each underground nest. However, multiple solitary nests can be found in an individual back yard or lawn. These bee suburb-like communities are what make them become more noticeable and often appear to be “swarming” around.

So, the question I often receive is why certain back yards or lawns seem to have more ground nests than others? According to most entomologists, the reason why some yards are more attractive is because they have an environment that these bees prefer. Ground-nesting bees generally prefer nesting in areas with morning sun exposure and well-drained soils containing little organic matter. Burrows are excavated in areas of bare ground or sparse vegetation. Basically, these critters like beach-front property just like us humans. So, what does this tell you about your lawn?

The best control methods include heavy watering or irrigation with a lawn sprinkler during the nest-building period to discourage nesting. Tilling of soil to destroy tunnels may help a little, but establishment of dense turf is probably the best long-term discouragement to further nesting. Applications of heavy organic matter could be included as a soil amendment, if practical, when tilling the soil. If the soil or location is not conducive to a healthy lawn, using ground covers or heavy mulches may be an alternative solution. Mulches may be used on bare patches caused by heavy traffic where grass will not grow. Generally, chemical treatments are not practical and control can be difficult since each individual nest cell or colony would require eradication.

If possible, carefully try to identify which type of bee you have before reaching for the jet-spray aerosol. For more aggressive bees and wasps such as yellow jackets, this may be your only option. But remember, most ground-nesting bees and wasps are “good bugs” and they have a very important, valuable function in our landscapes for pollination and getting rid of other bad bugs. For some crops, bumble bees and other native bees are more efficient pollinators than are managed honey bees. It’s estimated that one of every three bites of food you put in your mouth depends on

pollination by bees, in fact, 90 percent of all commercially grown field crops depend on pollination for growth. So, instead of destroying these valuable insects, take a moment to teach your children and neighbors to appreciate their importance and respect their place in nature.

For more information on ground-nesting bees and wasps, check out this online publication from Ohio State University Extension, <<http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/2000/2143.html>>.

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