

Bluestem Breezes
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Controlling Carpenter Bees

I wrote a column a few years back on carpenter bees and decided they warrant another appearance here. This year, we are seeing insects in abundance, regardless of location (field, garden, yard, etc.). It's best to stay on top of control efforts, rather than attempt to play catch-up later in the summer. Here are a few tips when it comes to the frequently termed "wood bees":

Carpenter bees are out in abundance now it seems. You might recognize them as the large bees (3/4-1 inch long) swarming your porches and barns. While these bees resemble bumble bees, they have bare abdomens that are a shiny black to iridescent green.

It is this time of year in which they fly close to homes and outbuildings. The bees overwinter as adults and emerge looking for other bees to mate with. It seems that the male bees somewhat dive bomb onlookers, but be reassured as they cannot sting. They are simply waiting for the females to emerge from their burrow in order to mate. Females are capable of stinging, but generally will not do so unless handled or molested.

I think we'll all agree these bees are a nuisance! More importantly than that, after spring-time mating females tunnel (bore) into seasoned wood to lay eggs. This produces round holes about 1/2 inch wide and located at a right angle to the surface for approximately an inch. At that point they turn sharply and bore with the wood grain for 4-6 inches.

Since the carpenter bee tunnels are used to rear the young, bees do not eat the wood. While this is one of the less negative attributes, the bees can cause wood stains by defecating near their tunnels.

Carpenter bees prefer seasoned woods like cedar, redwood, pine, cypress, and fir. Although, they are also capable of boring into soft or weathered woods on porches, ceilings, railings, overhead trim, porch furniture, dead tree limbs, fence posts, wooden shingles, wood siding, window sills and wood doors.

Additionally, carpenter bees normally bore into woods that are bare, unpainted, and weathered. For maximum resistance, it is best to keep all exposed wood surfaces painted. However, stains, varnishes, and wood pressure treated with a preservative may also prevent infestation to some degree.

To control the carpenter bee population infesting your property, treat tunnel entrances with an insecticide having residual activity. Aerosols and dusts are available. Treating at night is most effective while the bees are less active inside the tunnels. Do not plug the holes for a few days to allow the bees to come in contact with the insecticide. They will distribute the insecticide throughout the tunnels.

Afterward, plug the holes to prevent further use by carpenter bees. This also reduces the chances of wood decay. This treatment process is best completed in August to kills newly emerging bees.

More information on carpenter bees is available from the Extension Office (215 Kansas, Courthouse, Alma; kamayer@ksu.edu; 765-3821). Archives of Bluestem Breezes are located at wabaunsee.ksu.edu.