

Carpenter Bees

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We have been getting calls about “big bees swarming around outside of homes and outbuildings” and “they are burrowing into the wood”. These are Carpenter bees and resemble bumble bees but have bare abdomens that are a shiny black to iridescent green. Carpenter bees get their name from the ability of the female to bore into wood. In the spring these bees, which overwinter as adults, are emerging and looking for other bees to mate with. The male bees can be rather aggressive and may “dive bomb” people in their vicinity. However, they are harmless as they can not sting. The females are capable of stinging but generally will not do so unless handled or molested.

Carpenter bees prefer to attack wood that is bare, weathered, and unpainted. Common nesting sites are eaves, window trim, siding, decks, and outdoor furniture. Aside from being a nuisance, carpenter bees also can cause structural damage when they bore into seasoned woods, especially soft woods such as cedar, redwood, pine and fir. The female bees bore circular holes, about one-half inch in diameter, into the wood at right angles to the surface for about an inch. Then they turn sharply, boring with the wood grain for 4 to 6 inches. The female provides this tunnel-nest with “bee bread” (a mixture of pollen and regurgitated nectar), which serves as food for the larvae after the eggs hatch. She makes a cell for each larva and closes each cell with chewed up wood pulp. There may be as many as six to eight cells in the tunnel. Development from egg to adult varies from one to three months. Though adult bees usually emerge in late August, they will not mate until the following spring. Bees that survive the winter mate in the spring (April to June) and then begin preparation for the next brood. Carpenter bees do not eat the wood they tunnel in, but use these tunnels for rearing the young. The structural damage caused by one or two carpenter bees is slight. However, these bees cause wood stains by defecating near their tunnels. In addition, this pest will inhabit old tunnels and an infestation can persist year after year. Carpenter bees rarely attack painted wood, so keep all exposed wood surfaces well painted. Wood stains will not protect them. If painting is not practical, use wood that has been pressure treated with a preservative.

Recommended control is to identify the carpenter bee holes. Using a duster container with a pointed end, apply permethrin, malathion dust, or another labeled product directly into the hole(s). Labels should list the structure as the site of application OR under the “Pests controlled” section of a label, ‘carpenter bees’, ‘wood-destroying insects’, ‘bees and wasps’, or some variation of these should be listed to use that pesticide product. Treat the tunnel entrance after dark when the bees are less active. Wait approximately 24 to 48 hours after application of product to allow the bees to adequately spread the dust throughout their galleries. After waiting, plug the hole with a cork, plaster, putty, wood plug or other appropriate material.

