

News Article

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Managing Stinging Wasps

This time of year, stinging wasps may be making nests of epic proportions. Yellowjackets and baldfaced hornets are the typical culprits. Cliff Sadof, Purdue Extension entomologist, recently related a stinging experience he endured, and how others can safely manage a similar situation.

Sadof said the term “yellowjacket” is commonly used to describe ground-nesting social wasps. “Two common wasps with similar behavior are the native Eastern yellowjacket wasp, *Vespula maculifrons* and the exotic German yellowjacket wasp, *Vespula germanica*,” he said. “Both species are important predators in their native ecosystems where they prey on a variety of plant eating caterpillars.” The Eastern yellowjacket is common in Indiana.

A couple of years ago, Sadof said he was stung in late August when he was mowing over a yellowjacket nest in his backyard and a wasp flew up the pant leg in his shorts. The wasp inflicted 9 stings before meeting its demise at the hands of an animated Sadof.

Considering this experience, you may be shocked to learn that yellowjackets are beneficial when they are not near people. Sadof said they help protect trees from caterpillar pests, and they eat the flesh of dead animals.

However, when near people, they can sting. “Unlike honeybee workers who die after their barbed stinger gets stuck in your flesh, yellowjacket wasps can sting multiple times,” he said.

Sadof said that yellowjacket wasps spend their winters as mated queens. “In spring the queen makes a new nest to produce workers that she guards,” he said. “After workers mature they help the queen expand her nest and make more female workers, queens, and males.”

We are now at the point of the year when nests of these social wasps (live in colonies) get quite large. “At the peak of their activity in late summer and early fall, each nest can contain well over 1000 cells,” he said. “For this reason, running over a nest with a lawnmower can be a rather unpleasant experience.” Nests can also be made in structures, such as wall voids or crawl spaces in a home.

“When yellowjacket wasps are in structures it is best to call a trained professional to minimize stinging risks,” Sadof said. “While stings can be painful to most people, some people can have an allergic reaction that can be lethal if not treated quickly.”

Sadof said that ground nesting yellowjacket wasps can be treated with minimal risk by applying a foaming aerosol insecticide at night, according to label directions, when all the wasps are tucked into their nests. “But don’t even think about doing this if you know you have an allergy to wasps,” he said.

Another common social wasp nest we may see in our landscape this time of year is the baldfaced hornet nest. Baldfaced hornets will certainly sting, and they build the familiar large, grayish, pear-shaped nest that typically is suspended in trees or on sides of buildings. You’ve heard the colloquialism, “Mad as a hornet.” Leave hornet’s nests alone if you can. Remove in cold weather after several hard freezes when the nest is vacated.

Find Sadof’s original article on this subject, with an accompanying short video, at <https://www.purduelandscapereport.org/>. Additionally, access more comprehensive information on social bees and wasps in Purdue Extension’s publication E-44-W, at Purdue’s Education Store, <https://mdc.itap.purdue.edu/>.