

Wasps are beneficial in our gardens

I respect wasps. I've been stung numerous times but not in recent years. Every time I've been stung, I either accidentally disturbed a nest that I didn't know was there or I intentionally disturbed a nest and paid the price.

I think you can understand accidentally disturbing a nest. You may not understand boys playing a game of throwing rocks at a nest only to see who had the nerve to stay in place the longest. Now, as an adult, I'm not sure that I understand it.

Not only do I respect the ability of wasps to sting but I also respect the fact that wasps are beneficial.

Paper wasps are beneficial because they primarily feed on caterpillars. They are common in Florida. They frequently construct and attach their paper-like nests to building eaves or porch ceilings. The adults seek out caterpillars, which they sting and paralyze. They then take the caterpillars back to their nest and place them in individual cells as food for the developing larvae.

I've watched these wasps stinging and carrying away caterpillars from my garden. They are busy insects and are doing us gardeners a favor by reducing caterpillars in our landscapes and gardens.

There are other beneficial wasps commonly found around Florida homes. Mud daubers, for example, commonly build their mud-like nests on the sides of buildings close to human activity.

The mud dauber is a type of wasp. It is not as aggressive as the paper wasp and as a result, rarely stings people. You probably would have to squeeze one before it would defend itself by stinging. It's more interested in using its ability to sting on its prey.

This beneficial insect stings and paralyzes spiders. The mud dauber lays an egg on each paralyzed spider and seals it inside a chamber in its earthen nest. Upon hatching, the wasp larva feeds on the body of the spider. An emergence hole is made as the young wasp leaves the mud nest.

There are wasps and situations that I would not tolerate close to a house. Even though yellow jackets, a type of wasp, could be considered beneficial, they are too aggressive and too likely to repeatedly sting to have as close neighbors. Also be very cautious with any type of wasp or bee nest in close proximity to an individual with a known allergy to insect stings.

Just because an insect has the ability to sting does not make it all bad. It may serve a beneficial purpose. You'll have to decide how close you're willing for them to live to you.

Larry Williams UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County August 12, 2008