

Solitary bees active in spring

Carpenter bees and mining bees are two solitary bees which are active in early spring.

Solitary bees don't form social colonies but live as single bees. Each female does her own work to provision a nest cell with nectar and pollen as food for her offspring.

Carpenter bees are often seen hovering around houses and wooden fences on warm spring days. They resemble bumblebees but differ in that they have a black shiny abdomen while a bumblebee's abdomen is hairy with some yellow markings.

Females excavate tunnels (galleries) in wood. Males guard the galleries and may fly close to your face as a threat. But it is an act. Males can't sting and are harmless. Females can sting but rarely do unless confined or highly agitated.

People often notice the perfectly round holes up to ½ inch in diameter that females make in wood. These are entrance holes to the galleries. Each gallery contains six to eight cells. Each cell is provisioned with a ball of pollen on which the female lays an egg. Larvae develop in the cell and emerge as adults in late summer. Adults overwinter in old tunnels and emerge in spring to start the process again.

Carpenter bees prefer unpainted wood. A fresh coat of oil-based paint on exposed wood surfaces is an effective way to deter the bees. Wood stains are less effective.

Treating entrance holes with an insecticide spray or dust containing carbaryl (Sevin) or pyrethroids such as cyfluthrin may reduce damage. After a couple of days, plug the hole with wood putty or a piece of wood dowel coated with wood glue. This reduces the chance of offspring emergence and reuse of the tunnels.

Mining bees may build a large number of nests in lawns during spring. They are about ½ inch in length with a black body.

Females excavate vertical shafts in the soil with entrance holes that are about the diameter of a pencil. Several brood chambers are provisioned with pollen and nectar on which an egg is deposited. Larvae develop and emerge as adult bees the following spring to begin the cycle again.

Males can't sting. Females aren't likely to sting unless stepped on, handled or threatened.

They have a tendency to concentrate their nests in a relatively small area. It may appear that the grass is thin because of the bees but it is more likely that the bees are in the area because the grass was already thin. Mining bees are beneficial in that they help aerate the soil and serve as pollinators. Therefore, control is usually not necessary.

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