

Wasps: beneficial or too close for comfort

I respect the fact that wasps can sting when threatened or disturbed. But I also respect the fact that they are beneficial. The paper wasp, a common wasp species around homes, is beneficial because it primarily feeds on caterpillars.

Paper wasps are very common in Florida. They frequently construct and attach their paper-like nest to a building eave or the ceiling of a porch. 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 have watched and actually witnessed one of these wasps stinging and carrying away a caterpillar from my backyard vegetable garden. They are very busy insects and are doing us gardeners a favor by reducing the population of 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. I think you would almost have to squeeze one in your hand before it would defend itself by stinging. It is 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 certainly some types of wasps and situations that I would not tolerate close to a house. For example, I would not knowingly allow a yellow jacket nest to remain close to a place of human habitation. Even though yellow jackets, a type of wasp, could be considered beneficial, they are just too aggressive and too likely to repeatedly sting to have as close neighbors. I would also be very cautious and concerned with any type of wasp or bee nest in close proximity to an individual with a known allergy to insect stings.

The point is just because an insect has the ability to sting does not make it all bad. It very well may serve a beneficial purpose - as is the case with many types of wasps. You will have to decide for yourself how close you're willing for them to live to you. The front porch may be too close.

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