

# Carpenter Bees

These seemingly harmless creatures could cause serious structural damage





## Garden Talk



*Shane Harris*

**A**s a kid, I spent much of my time outdoors playing and exploring.

Mainly it was my mom who influenced that decision. She would run my sister and me out of the house on a pretty spring or summer day, so she could get her housework done.

Plus, in the early '80s, our family TV had fewer than 10 channels on a clear day, and I did not have video games or the latest-and-greatest tech gadgets for entertainment, so most of my childhood days consisted of being outdoors and learning about nature.

My fondest childhood memories were the beginnings of spring. I knew spring was here when all the pink creeping phlox growing along the hill going down to our basement were blooming. There, I would see carpenter bees and swallowtail butterflies going from flower to flower. I was easily entertained for hours – watching, chasing and catching them in nets and quart jars.

Now, as an adult, nothing has really changed. I still have a kid-like awe and fascination of insects. I still chase and catch bugs, except that now, I typically have a camera with me, too.

A sure sign that spring is officially here is when carpenter bees can be found buzzing around. Carpenter bees, which are often mistaken for bumblebees, are best known for hanging around houses, porches, barns and other wooden structures during spring and summer.

Bumblebees have hairy abdomens with black and yellow stripes, whereas carpenter bees do not have yellow hair on their abdomens. Carpenter bees tunnel and nest in wood, thus their name; whereas, bumblebees nest in cavities in the ground.

After a long winter, adult carpenter bees come out to forage and mate. They can be seen buzzing around flowering plants to collect pollen. Carpenter bees are very good pollinators but could be a nuisance and cause damage if they decide to excavate holes in wood for their young.

One thing I learned as a kid is that carpenter bees are not aggressive and are basically harmless. Male carpenter bees, which have a pale yellow “nose” between their eyes, do not have the ability to sting (note: *all* male bees, wasp, ants, etc., cannot sting). Males are commonly seen hanging around flowers and near wooden structures, chasing females. Male carpenter bees also are very territorial and typically

### **The Buzz**

Carpenter bees are first noticed as they pollinate azaleas in early spring.

hover in areas to look for females and chase away other males. They act aggressive but only to put on a show. So, kids, catching and holding them is OK.

Female carpenter bees, which



have solid black heads, can sting but rarely do – unless forced to or when handled. They bore into wood, excavating tunnels in which to lay their eggs. They are usually the ones doing the damage to wood and can be found going in and out of the holes they bored. They also spend a lot of their time feeding on and pollinating flowers.

The presence of sawdust typically indicates there has been carpenter bee activity. Inside the created tunnels, about five or six cells are constructed for housing individual eggs. Collected pollen from spring flowering plants is stored with a single egg in each cell for food for the developing larva. Later in the summer, new adult bees will emerge and forage on flowers. These bees will return to the wooden homes in the fall for hibernation until next spring.

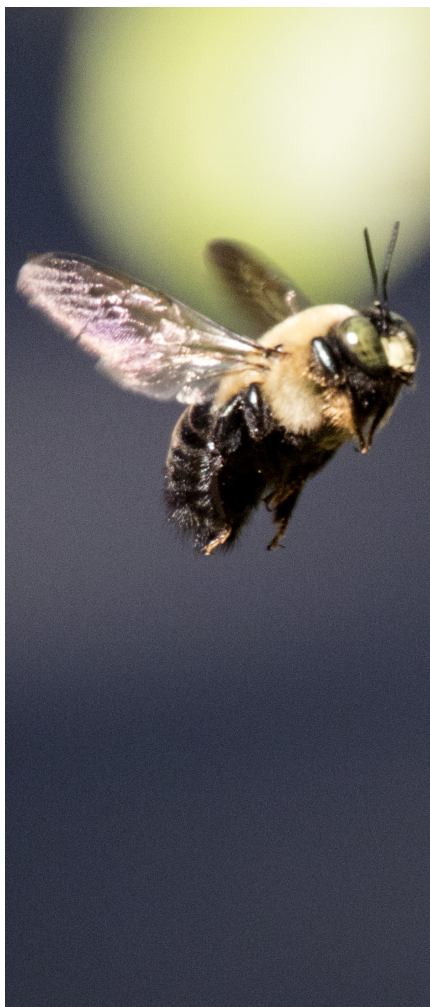
Despite being beneficial insects, carpenter bees have a bad reputation due to the damage

they cause to wood. A clear sign of carpenter bee infestation is the appearance of circular gallery holes (about the size of a penny) in exposed wood. Carpenter bees excavate galleries in many species of dried, seasoned wood, but they seem to prefer softwoods – such as pine, fir, redwood and cedar.

They may cause cosmetic damage to porch and shed rafters, railings, overhead trim and eaves, wooden porch furniture, dead trees, fence posts, wooden siding and even wooden park benches. They prefer unpainted or well-weathered wood to hardwood or painted timbers. Carpenter bee infestations may persist for several years, as each new generation emerges and the process naturally continues.

To prevent carpenter bees from causing damage, keep all wood products treated with paint or varnish. Treating the holes with an insecticide in the evenings when the bees are at rest also could help. Liquid, aerosol or dust insecticides, containing carbaryl, boric acid, bifenthrin, cyfluthrin, deltamethrin or lambda cyhalothrin could be applied directly into tunnel openings. Allow the bees to come and go for a day or so; then, fill and seal all new and old holes with wood putty, a dowel or cork.

Another option is to swat pesky bees with a fly swatter or tennis racket as they try to make





new holes or enter holes. This can be fun, as well as an effective control method.

Trapping is another method. In the last few years, commercial and homemade traps have shown promise for temporarily reducing carpenter bee populations and damage. The theory is that carpenter bees often mistake penny-sized circular holes on these traps as the entry holes to nest galleries. Wooden boxes are constructed with a penny size hole that allows the bees to enter but not escape. Bees fall into a narrow-neck clear container that is connected to the bottom of the box, and it is hard, if not impossible, to get out since they tend to seek light rather than problem-solve their way back up and out. A little liquid dishwashing detergent placed in the container will kill the entrapped bees.

Unfortunately, there are not any known products or insecticides that can be applied to cedar siding or other types of wood on houses to deter carpenter bees. Protective contact insecticides applied directly to wood does very little good. No research data can be found to show that wood preservatives will work to control carpenter bees. In fact, it is likely less reliable than painting or using pressure-treated wood.

Woodpeckers also could magnify carpenter

bee damage to wooden structures. There are instances when woodpeckers have pecked sides of houses to access and expose the carpenter bee holes and galleries to feed on the larva inside.

Unfortunately, there are no controls or eradication options for woodpecker damage, as all woodpeckers are protected under Alabama law.

Get outdoors and enjoy the spring season, but beware of all that buzzing!

For additional help with home and garden information, contact the local county Extension office or visit [aces.edu](http://aces.edu).

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### **The Business of Bees**

Clockwise from top left: The male carpenter bee has a yellow nose and does not sting; Traps, like this popular homemade design, can be very effective in catching carpenter bees; Male carpenter bees are very territorial and spend much of their time chasing off competitors; A female carpenter bee tunnels into wood to lay her eggs.