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Stinging Insects: Good? Bad? Ugly??

Stinging insects frighten nearly everyone. Even though bees and wasps rarely sting, most people feel threatened in their presence. Getting stung is a painful experience and can be fatal for a few highly allergic individuals.

Wasps and bees actually rank among the most beneficial of insects. Bees are essential for the pollination of many plants, and wasps capture a wide variety of insect pests as food for their young. These benefits are often lost on people who have experienced the capacity of a bee or wasp to defend itself. It is the *social bees and wasps* that are responsible for most stings. Social bees and wasps most frequently sting in defense of their nest. Because many species nest in, on or close by human dwellings, painful encounters are sometimes unavoidable.

If you discover a nest of bees or wasps on your property, a pest control professional can safely eliminate it. However, there are currently no reliable means of removing all stinging insects from an outdoor area. So you need to learn when to eliminate and when to coexist.

Yellowjacket wasps are the cause of most stings attributed to bees. These colorful black and yellow insects cause more human stings than any other insect for several reasons: they are extremely numerous, they often nest in and around buildings, and they are attracted to human food. Yellowjackets hunting food & drink can quickly crawl inside a human's sandwich or drink can and be concealed from view. Since wasps can sting repeatedly, discovery can be startling and painful!

The only true hornet in Maryland is the yellow and chestnut colored **European hornet**. This big, relatively docile wasp builds nests in concealed places, but often hunts at night and is attracted to porch lights.

If a wasp nest must be eliminated due to location, pest professionals have the equipment and chemical controls to safely destroy the nests. If a nest is inaccessible, or if the wasps do not present a problem, leave the nest alone. All wasps die during winter, except for a few queens, which overwinter elsewhere. Nests are not reused the next season and present no future problem.

Honey bees are the familiar small, fuzzy, brown bees that collect nectar and pollen from flowers to feed colony members. Although honey bees will sting in self-defense if stepped on or bumped, they are generally reluctant to do so. Unlike wasps that can sting repeatedly, honey bees can only sting once and then they die.

Bumble bees are the large, hairy black and yellow bees. Their ground nests are seldom seen and do not sting unless their nest is stepped on. Although they may seem imposing, they are not aggressive while they collect nectar and pollen from flowers.

Both honey bees and wasps have barbed stings (which many people erroneously refer to as 'stingers'). As soon as you are stung, inspect the site and remove any material still in the

skin. The faster you pull away or scrape off the sting, the less venom will be injected, and the smaller the resulting swelling.

Be aware of possible life –threatening reactions. Severe allergic reactions to wasp and bee stings are rare, but can include: labored breathing, difficulty swallowing, hoarseness or thickened speech, nausea or vomiting, weakness or dizziness and confusion. Call a medical professional immediately if in doubt.

Use common sense in all outdoor situations.

- Be alert when doing yard work. Most people are stung while working outside
- Avoid eating or drinking outdoors.
- Do not go outside barefoot
- Be cautious around outdoor pools. Many stinging insects collect water from pools.
- Stay on established trails in parks and natural areas. Nests have probably been removed from well-traveled areas.
- Keep garbage tightly covered
- Do not feed pets outside
- Promptly clean up pet waste
- Keep the ground under fruit trees clear of fallen fruit.

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