

To Bee or Not to Bee!

As spring approaches, it is time to think about planting seeds, pruning bushes and getting fruit trees ready for the spring bloom. A decision now is to decide whether to attract orchard mason bees to your property or not. These little black bees begin to emerge in March, when the first bushes and native trees begin to bloom, and continue into late spring and early summer. They are indispensable for pollination of fruit trees, since our "wild" and domesticated honey bees have become decimated by disease and parasites. Mason bees are very easy to attract to the garden and to get them to propagate there. All that you need it to do is supply them with the proper breeding containers. "Build them, and they will come!"



The adult mason bees lay their eggs in holes that they find in wood, often holes that were left by boring beetles. The size of these holes must accommodate the body of the bee, because they crawl deep inside to make multiple chambers in the hole for the larvae to feed and grow. After laying an egg in the chamber, the mason bees gather pollen and pack the chamber with it to provide food for the immature bee. When a sufficient amount of pollen has been deposited, the chamber is sealed with mud, and a new chamber is formed. If the hole is deep enough, many chambers will be formed in each, one in front of the other. The larvae feed on the pollen, pupate and then remain in this stage throughout the rest of the summer and winter. In spring, the pupa turn into adult bees, they cut their way out of the chamber to emerge in March-April, and the life cycle begins anew.

Needless to say, all that gathering of pollen for the bee offspring spreads around a great deal of excess pollen, and flowers (especially of fruit trees) are readily fertilized. Mason bee activity is especially important if we have an early spring, before other bees become very active.

To attract mason bees to your property, you need only to build some nesting boxes for the bees. I have found that wood 4x4 about 16 inches long works great for this purpose. Do not, however, use treated wood, as the chemicals used in the processing are lethal to the larvae. I drill 5/16th inch holes in one side about 1/2 inch apart, almost through to the other side of the wood. A drill press makes this job easy, as you can control the depth very precisely. One block of wood can contain as many as 50 to 70 holes. Be sure to clean the entrance to the holes so that there are no obstructions to the bees. I put a hanger on the back of the block and attach the box to a fence post or out building facing east near my fruit trees. Bees may not use it if it is facing south, so avoid that direction. Bees should be seen around and on the block in March.

The joy of watching these industrious little black bees is worth the effort of making the houses. You also may get a better fruit crop! By the way, commercially sold bee boxes are also available!

