

# Wasps are actually good for your garden

BONNIE COURTER

Master Gardener

**Q**uestion: I'm starting to see yellowjackets around my home, building nests under the roof eaves. How can I control them?

**A**nswer: Yellowjackets, or paper wasps, are the bane of homeowners or of summer picnic outings. First of all, know your stinging insect culprits. Yellowjacket refers to wasps of the genera *Vespula* or *Dolichovespula* and are medium sized, black, and marked with irregular yellow bands. Paper wasps are also yellow and black, but have slimmer, elongated body shape and legs that dangle in flight. Bald-Faced Hornets (*Dolichovespula maculata*) are a larger, stout-bodied wasp with a whitish-yellow face and a few white marks near the end of their abdomen.

These social insects all build grayish papery nests made of fibers chewed from weathered wood. Paper wasps and aerial yellowjackets build upside-down umbrella-looking structures in sheltered areas such as under eaves of buildings. Some nests can develop into large football-sized



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structures. The nests of bald-faced hornets are often found high up in trees, intermixing the papery material with sticks and leaves. The Western Yellowjacket builds subterranean nests using natural cavities under rocks or deserted gopher or mole holes, and are very aggressive.

But before you automatically get out an arsenal of pesticide sprays to nuke them, realize that yellowjackets and their relatives are extremely beneficial pollinators, predators and scavengers. Drinking nectar from flowers resulting in

pollination, these insects also feed on caterpillars, aphids, grubs, grasshoppers, spiders and other living insects. If their nests are away from human activity, they should be left alone.

However, they can pose a danger to humans if found close to home. Yellowjackets become aggressive if they feel their nests and young are threatened. Power equipment like mowers and weed trimmers create vibrations that alert them to sting. Their sting is quite painful, causing redness and swelling that lasts a few hours

to several days. Unlike honeybees who die after one sting, yellowjackets can sting multiple times, especially when trapped in clothing or hair. They become even more aggressive as summer progresses when food becomes more scarce and they begin to scavenge picnic foods where meats and sugary drinks are prevalent.

Mated queens are the only ones to overwinter and they emerge in March or April to begin building new nests and laying their eggs. They abandon the previous year's nests so these can

be safely knocked down in the winter.

In early spring use a spray hose or broom to dislodge developing nests when small, but only when it's dark and cool. If the nests are closed but smaller than a grapefruit, use an aerosol insecticide labeled for wasps or hornets that contain a pyrethrin ingredient. They kill quickly and have the added environmental-friendly benefit of breaking down quickly in sunlight and rain. Treat in the evening or early morning

when all the insects are "home". Once dry, knock down the nest.

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*For a more comprehensive guide, see *A Homeowner's Guide to Yellow Jackets, Bald-Faced Hornets and Paper Wasps* by OSU Extension.*

*Do you have a gardening question? Please e-mail, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardeners Plant Clinic at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), 541-236-3052, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg.*