

Mason Bee Information

The gentle mason bee is an efficient pollinator for spring fruit trees, berries, cherries and nuts. She easily outperforms the honey bee since she gathers pollen and nectar in the same flower visit. One mason bee can pollinate 12 lbs. of cherries. That task requires 60 honey bees. Mason bees make food. Only honey bees make honey.

Of the 4,000 species of bees in North America about 130 of them are “cavity nesting” bees, such as the mason bee. She builds nests, not hives like the honey bee or hornet. About the size of a black fly, she’ll look for existing holes, around 8mm in diameter. You can help by setting out a bee house with nesting holes.

Protective gear isn’t needed with these gentle bees. *You can hold the female, but if **handled roughly**, she’ll sting. *Her sting is similar to a mosquito bite. The male does not have a stinger. Males emerge first, when day temperatures are 50° -55° F (10°-13° C). They mate with emerging females a few days later, then die in about two weeks. Their job is done!

From then on, every female is a queen. 3 – 4 Tubes are hers alone. She gathers nectar for energy and pollen for food for herself and her young. Starting at the back of the nesting hole, she packs some mud, a pea-sized bit of pollen and then lays an egg. Each egg chamber is sealed with mud, and the process is repeated until the hole is filled. She can lay 20 to 35 eggs during her 6-week lifetime---from Mid March to early June.

Meanwhile, each egg spends the summer transforming into an adult. By early September, their protective cocoon is spun and they are ready for winter hibernation. Warm spring weather and early blossoms bring them out of their slumber, and the cycle is repeated for next season’s bees.

We need more of these wonderful garden pollinators to supplement the challenged honey bee. It’s easy to create a bee haven to help bees thrive, not just survive, in nature. By spending just a couple of hours a year, you can more than double the bee population in six easy steps.

Choose a house. Place it near fruit blossoms facing the morning sun about 5 feet high. The warmth will awaken your bees. Under an overhang to protect from wind and rain! Add nesting holes. Choose easy opening tubes, reeds or stackable wood trays. Don’t use drilled blocks or bamboo. You can’t harvest bees from these, and over time pests move in. Set out bee cocoons, stagger setting out cocoons at 2 – 3 week intervals to extend season. Place cocoons on top of or behind nesting holes when day temps are 50°-55° F (10°-13° C) and blossoms are out. Release pheromone for individual tubes Bees will find their way to holes. (NOTE: Keep bees refrigerated until ready to set out.) Keep moist clay-like mud (shovel depth) nearby for the female to seal egg chambers in nests. A hole in the ground near the nest works best.

After bee activity stops, store filled nesting holes in garage/shed. Bees develop into adults over the summer. Handle tubes carefully at this stage, stand them on end with mud opening on top. This is recommended for healthiest cocoons. As an option, harvest cocoons. In the fall, open holes, remove cocoons and refrigerate until spring.