

Bug-Wise

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Office: 1-662-325-2085

Paper Wasps: Paper wasps are social insects that build papery, single tiered nests using wood fibers they collect from exposed wood surfaces. When they are out collecting wood for nest material or foraging for food, individual wasps are not aggressive and only sting if they are accidentally pressed against the skin in some way: get trapped in clothing, tangled in hair, etc. But they will readily defend their nests and most of us have experienced this defensive response on more than one occasion. In most cases, you did not disturb the nest intentionally; you just did not know it was there and got too close while working or playing in the area.

Paper wasps overwinter as mated queens, usually in some protected site such as a hollow tree, attic, barn, or storage shed. Attics that aren't effectively screened and sealed often shelter hundreds of overwintering wasps. These wasps leave their overwintering site in the spring to begin building a nest. Paper wasps build their nests in an above ground site that is somewhat sheltered and protected from rainfall: under eaves of buildings, in dense shrubs, in infrequently used equipment, and other protected sites.

The most common paper wasps in Mississippi are a large red and black wasp and a smaller brown and yellow banded wasp. There may actually be more than two species, but paper wasps are surprisingly difficult to identify to species. The brown and yellow banded wasps are often mistakenly referred to as yellowjackets, but yellowjackets nest in the ground and are yellow and black. Through much of Mississippi, these yellow and brown paper wasps are often called 'Guinea wasps'. This is a better name for these wasps, but it is not an official common name.

Most Mississippians know the big red and black wasps, as 'red wasps', though again, this is not an official common name, and there are other species of wasps that are called 'red wasps' in other parts of the country. The 'Carolina paper wasp', is another paper wasp sometimes seen in the state. It is about the same size as a 'red wasp', but has an orange body with black wings. This wasp prefers to build its nest in more hidden locations than the other two species and sometimes nests in walls and other voids with large openings.

When over-wintered queens begin building a nest, they are on their own. But as soon as they get two or three cells built they lay eggs, and after a few weeks these develop into workers that will help the founding queen continue to enlarge the nest, care for young, and forage for food and wood pulp. This means that wasp nests get bigger as the summer progresses, and by the end of the season nests can have many dozens of adult wasps. 'Get in' a wasp nest in April, and you may get stung once or twice, but by August your chances of sustaining multiple stings are much greater.

No one likes to get stung by paper wasps. It hurts! Individual responses to wasp stings vary greatly. For most people the pain lasts only a few minutes before subsiding, and there may be only a small wheal at the sting site. Other people may swell significantly in response to even a single sting, and the swelling can last for some time. Some people are especially sensitive to wasp stings and experience serious medical symptoms ranging from intense swelling of the area of the body where the sting occurred to body-wide, systemic responses, such as swelling of the throat, difficulty breathing, hives and itching of other areas of the body, and dropping blood pressure. Fortunately only a very small portion of people

exhibit this extreme hypersensitivity. These kinds of anaphylactic responses can be life threatening, and 50 to 100 people die in the US annually from insect stings.

How can you avoid wasp stings, or at least reduce your chances of getting stung? Learn to be 'wasp-wise'. Be aware of the kinds of places wasps build their nests and check for nests before moving infrequently used items or otherwise causing a disturbance in the area. The more exposed nests are easy to spot, but don't forget to check for nests in more hidden areas as well. If that fertilizer spreader has been hanging in the tool shed since last year, it could have a large wasp nest built in it. There might also be one on the underside of that picnic table you are about to move, or in those shrubs you are about to prune. The best way to check for hidden wasp nests is to give the item you are about to move a sharp shake or jar, then step back a few steps and see if any wasps fly out. Repeat this process a few times. If you see no wasps, proceed with your task. If you see wasps, determine where the nest is located and treat it before proceeding.

How do you control paper wasps? Keep a can of aerosol wasp and hornet spray handy. There are many different brand names, all of which contain a mixture of fast-acting insecticides and synergists and provide rapid contact control. Some are designed to shoot a narrow stream of spray up to 15 feet. Others produce a wider spray pattern, but won't spray as far. Some wasp and hornet sprays produce a foam that helps incapacitate flying insects until the insecticide takes effect.

To use wasp and hornet sprays, simply approach the nest quietly, minimizing any vibrations and other disturbance, and direct a three to five second burst of spray at the nest, being sure to cover all of the wasps. It is best to get close enough that you can thoroughly soak the nest on your first attempt. Try to spray a nest from too far away and you may not get adequate coverage to quickly kill all of the wasps. Use appropriate caution. There's always the potential to get stung any time you are dealing with stinging insects. People who are especially sensitive or allergic to wasp stings need to get someone else to handle wasp control.

Keep in mind that despite their ability to sting paper wasps are beneficial insects. They don't provide much pollination, but they catch large numbers of caterpillars to carry back to the nests and feed to their grubs. Some organic and specialty farmers even build 'wasp houses' near fields to encourage wasps to nest there and provide free insect control. The point being that you don't have to eliminate every wasp nest you see. If a nest is in an out of the way place where it's not likely to cause a problem, why not live and let live?

Blake Layton, Extension Entomology Specialist