

Gardennote

Avoid trouble with bees

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Bees are becoming more of a problem because of the extension of residential areas into native bushland and the increase in the number of swimming pools, which attract bees, particularly in hot weather.

While bees may cause some inconvenience, insecticides have destroyed many natural pollinating insects, and some garden plants therefore depend on bees for pollination and reproduction. This Gardennote explains how to avoid trouble with bees.

Bee stings

Bees sting to protect themselves or their hive. Any interference with a hive or swarm of bees will cause the guard bees to attack unless they are quietened with smoke. Petroleum products such as kerosene or petrol and garden sprays, paint thinners and hair lacquer irritate bees and may excite them to sting.

Bees sting for other reasons, too. If a bee is trodden on or trapped in a person's hair, it will sting to protect itself. Bees, like dogs and horses, can sense fear, so if you are afraid of bees, the chances of being stung are greater.

If you are bothered by bees, avoid swatting them. Walk quietly away into the wind with your head bowed and your face covered with your hands.

Removing a bee sting

The bee's sting consists of two barbed, harpoon-like shafts attached to a poison sac. When the bee stings, small muscles work the barbs inwards alternately with one barb holding as the other penetrates more deeply. Poison from the sac is pumped down the centre of the sting, causing pain.

To prevent the poison entering your skin, remove the sting as soon as possible. The best way is to press down hard with a fingernail on the skin, and scrape the sting out. If the fingernail

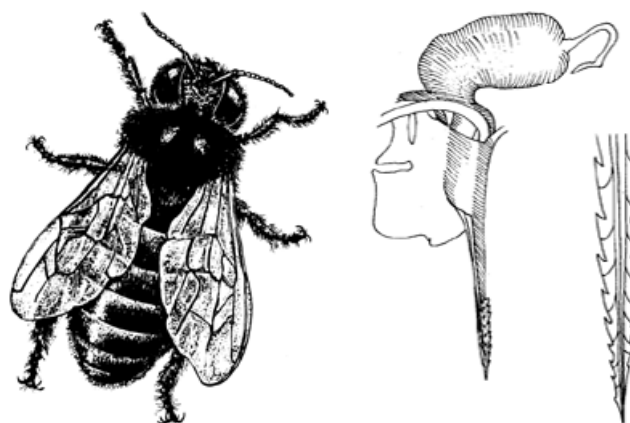


Figure 1: Bees sting to protect themselves or their hive.

Figure 2: A bee sting consists of two barbed harpoon like shafts attached to a poison sac.

is not pressed hard enough the sting will not be removed in one action.

Do not grasp the sting to pull it out as this squeezes more poison out of the sac as it is pulled. As the sting is barbed, some of the barb may not be removed but this will not cause irritation or pain.

The affected area should be washed with cool water to remove any poison that may be on the skin and to soothe the pain. Such remedies as applying a blue bag have little, if any, effect. Washing the poison from the skin will also stop other bees from being attracted by the scent, which excites them into stinging the same area.

Reactions to bee stings

Bee stings are very painful and are often followed by local swelling and then itching as the swelling subsides. The swelling varies from a small reaction similar to an ant or mosquito bite to a swollen area which turns red and itches for three or four days. With a normal reaction, the whole leg or arm may swell after being stung but this is never dangerous.

Important disclaimer

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Repeated stinging will gradually build up an immunity, with each sting causing less swelling. Beekeepers, who are often stung more than 100 times each day, usually react until they become immune, which may take from 3 to 12 months, depending on the number of stings.

Allergic reactions

A true allergic reaction will develop within minutes after a sting, with blotches appearing all over the body. The eyes and nose may water and the scalp, palms of the hands, soles of the feet and crotch may itch. The lips and the tissue surrounding the eyes may swell and, as the blotches become more apparent, large areas of the body may become red and raised.

A person usually recovers from such a reaction in several hours but if breathing is affected, medical help should be sought. A person with an allergic reaction who is stung again may develop a more serious reaction. Their blood pressure may drop drastically, causing unconsciousness, and the throat passages may swell, making breathing difficult. In this case, medical attention should be sought immediately.

A person with an allergy to bee stings should be prepared with an insect sting kit as recommended by a family doctor. The kit may contain anti-histamine tablets, adrenalin, a syringe and an iso-prenaline spray inhaler.

Fortunately, allergic reactions to bee stings are rare, with only about one person in 10,000 affected.

Prevention of stings

Water

Bees are attracted by moisture, particularly in hot weather, as they need water to cool the hive and maintain humidity. This increases the chance of being stung near leaking taps, swimming pools, or after a lawn has been watered.

Many people are stung on bare feet while moving lawn sprinklers, so wear suitable footwear or water the lawn late in the day so that it will be dry by morning.

Leaking taps should be repaired and bird baths should not be near pathways, play areas or work areas. Fish ponds should be covered with shadecloth or fibreglass flywire.

Swimming pools should also be covered and if bees are found floating in the pool they should be removed before people use the pool. A filter system using saline chlorinators makes the water salty and less attractive to bees.



Figure 3: Keep clear of bee swarms until professionally removed.

Fruit and sugars

Sugar will attract bees when flowers are scarce. Any soft drink bottles with a little sweet liquid remaining should be put into a rubbish bin with a close fitting lid.

Damaged fruit should be removed from the tree as the juice may attract bees, although bees themselves cannot damage the skin of sound fruit.

Flowering plants

Some plants attract bees because they have a strong scent or because they produce large quantities of nectar. These species should not be planted near walkways and play areas. A nursery can recommend alternatives.

Some plants such as the umbrella tree *Schefflera actinophylla*, when flowering, cause bees to fall to the ground dazed, where they will sting people walking barefoot in the area. The problem can be overcome by cutting the flowers or using a temporary fence to fence off the area while bees are present.

Backyard beekeepers

Two hives is a reasonable number to keep in a backyard in the metropolitan area without worrying neighbours. The hives should be placed in a suitable area, preferably where the bees will fly high and not be a nuisance, and a suitable water supply should be provided. However, bees from wild hives in the area may still drink from neighbouring properties where water is available.

If a neighbour's bees are causing concern, the problem should be discussed with the beekeeper or referred to the local council. If the problem persists, officers of the Department of Agriculture and Food are available for advice. The Department does not control where bees may be kept.