

MASON BEE

by Carol Ann Harlos



I want to encourage all of you to provide a Mason Bee home in your garden. Unlike honeybees, Mason bees are a native bee species that are extremely gentle. You have to really work hard to get them (the females) to sting you. I have worked in the garden in their mist and simply marveled at their productivity and gentleness. Even though Mason bees have experienced a decrease in population due to insecticides and habitat loss they are still a hardy species. They are "solitary" bees rather than members of a hive. This means they work independently and only for themselves. Thus Mason bees are less susceptible to disease, pests, and insecticides than hive bees such as honeybees. Since they don't make honey (as do bumble bees by the way) many people have little interest in them.

Mason bees (*Osmia*) are common throughout most of the U.S. There are about 150 species. They are a little smaller than a honeybee, and metallic blue or blue-black in color. The name "Mason bee" comes from the female's habit of using mud to seal off individual cells where they have laid their eggs.

In the wild, mason bees lay their eggs in small natural cavities such as woodpecker holes, insect holes and hollow stems. You can provide a commercial "home" (pictured

above), gather large straws together, drill holes in wood, or gather hollow stems together and hang

them on a fence or other convenient place. Five-sixteenths inch is an ideal diameter for the holes. Originally I hung my home on a fence but often missed the opportunity to see the Mason bees emerging or egg laying. Now I have one of my homes hanging from a trellis near my front door. (This has scared some people by the way.... so I educate them.)

Male mason bees emerge from the "tubes" first in early spring. They await the females. When the females emerge mating takes place. The males die. The females forage for pollen and nectar which are stuffed into the far end of the nesting cavity or tube. When there is enough a female lays an egg and seals the cell with mud. (I like to have some loose wet soil near the nests.) This continues until the chamber is full. Females repeat the process in another tube. This takes four to six weeks. The females die.

The larvae hatch shortly after the eggs are laid. They eat the stored food. After about 10 days the larvae spin a cocoon and pupate. Next spring the young adults emerge and the process begins all over again.

Please encourage Mason Bees. They are extraordinary pollinators! Unlike honeybees, Mason bees work in cool or rainy weather and are generalists

(they pollinate whatever they find.) They pollinate pears, plums, blueberries, raspberries, and flowers in the rose family.

Whether you purchase a Mason Bee home or devise your own, please dispose of it after they emerge in spring; they will not reuse it.

Want to buy Mason bees? Go online. You can order them now for autumn delivery.



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