

Ag Column
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Protect Wood Structures from Wood Boring Bees

Wood boring bees, also known as carpenter bees, are right on schedule this spring. These bees can be beneficial by serving as pollinators, but can also destroy bare, unpainted soft woods, such as redwood, cypress, cedar, and pine. Treated or painted wood is less susceptible to damage. However, even treated or painted wood becomes acceptable with age.

The carpenter bee mines galleries within wood, compromising the wood's strength. The gallery opening is an almost perfect ½ inch diameter hole. This hole goes in straight initially and then turns at a ninety degree angle. The gallery then runs parallel with the grain of the wood, making it difficult to know the extent of the damage.

According to UT Extension Entomologist, Dr. Karen Vail, the female lays an egg in the gallery, leaves an adequate supply of food and seals it with wood pulp. A gallery usually contains four to six cells. Galleries are usually reused and have been reported to be as long as ten feet.

Homeowners of housing with exposed wood or other wooden structures should be vigilant in identifying carpenter bee infestations. Fresh sawdust beneath a hole is a good sign of carpenter bees. The bees will also leave a yellow-brown feces and pollen below the hole.

Control of carpenter bees is often difficult and must be addressed annually. The most effective control can be achieved by applying insecticidal dusts or liquids to the galleries. Homeowners may not have access to insecticidal dusts labeled for wood treatment and thus may need to apply sprays (Bee/wasp killer aerosols, Ortho Home Defense Max Termite and Destructive Bug Killer Concentrate [bifenthrin], Bayer Advanced Home Pest Control Indoor and Outdoor Insect Killer ready-to-use pump [cyfluthrin] or others) into the nest opening.

Vail suggests leaving the gallery open after insecticide application for at least 24 hours. The hole can then be sealed with a wood dowel or other suitable material. Woodpeckers may target infested areas in search of the carpenter bees. Painting or staining the area will help deter the woodpecker. Homeowners should inspect structures in the fall as well and seal galleries. This will prevent them from over wintering in these galleries.

Dr. Mike Potter, University of Kentucky Extension Entomologist, suggests a broadcast application of insecticide to the entire wood surface in the case where a large number of bees are attracted to a structure. The residual effect of sprays applied to the exterior wood surface will be limited to one to three weeks due to exposure to rain and the environment. This treatment will need to be repeated where necessary.