

By Karen Mayne

Yellow jackets! Late summer and fall are when these wasps become aggressive and dangerous to homeowners, children and pets. A recent encounter by a neighbor with a ground nest while cutting the grass resulted in a trip to the hospital. Let's make sure this doesn't happen to anyone else.

Yellow jackets, hornets, and paper wasps are all members of the wasp family. Not all wasps are aggressive and some do not sting. But close encounters with yellow jackets and hornets as they defend their nests can lead to painful and multiple stings. And, in the case of people who are allergic to bees or wasps, a sting can be life threatening.

Yellow jackets are often confused with bees. In contrast to honey bees, yellow jackets are not covered with tan-brown hair and lack the flattened hairy hind legs that bees use to carry pollen. Yellow jackets have black and yellow alternating stripes and have a stinger without barbs and can sting (and bite) repeatedly. Honey bees have a barbed stinger that they leave in you, and after stinging the honey bee dies.

As a social wasp, yellow jackets live in colonies, most often in the ground, but may also nest in buildings or in logs, firewood, or trees. Common locations for nests are in lawns, at the base of trees or shrubs, or in abandoned rodent tunnels. The colony dies out in the winter and the nest will not be reused. Yellow jackets forage primarily on other insects early in the season, including flies and pest insects. In late summer, these wasps switch to fruits and other sweets, as the colony becomes large and requires more energy from sugars. This is when they become a nuisance around cook-outs, trash cans, and hummingbird feeders.



To avoid being stung, be mindful of your surroundings while outside, and if you see lots of yellow jackets, wasps, or hornets, it's a good bet a nest is near. Keep food covered during cook-outs and be particularly careful of open soft drink cans because yellow jackets may crawl inside for a drink and sting you on the way out!

If you are stung, remove the stinger, if it is still present, by scraping with the edge of a credit card or other straight-edged object. Do not use tweezers. These may squeeze the venom sac and increase the amount of venom released. Then apply ice to the area. Creams and pills containing antihistamines may reduce mild reactions. However, if you or someone else who has been stung exhibits signs of an allergic reaction. such as hives, swelling of the throat or eyes, difficulty breathing, dizziness or fainting, abdominal cramping or nausea. then immediate medical treatment is imperative. This is a serious medical condition called anaphylaxis, which can be fatal if not treated promptly. Always call 911 if someone has an allergic reaction to a bee or wasp sting, remove their rings and any restrictive items, and have them lay down. For people known to be allergic, talk with your doctor about a medical alert bracelet and a self-injecting kit of epinephrine (Epi-pen).

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