

Yellow Jackets

Uninvited guests at your summer barbeque

One of the most common pests at your summer picnic or barbeque is the yellow jacket. Little known is the fact that these "pests" are actually beneficial around gardens and commercially grown fruits and vegetables at other times of the year because they voraciously feed on other insect pests such as caterpillars and flies. Yellow jackets become a summer nuisance when their normal food source disappears and the yellow jacket diet changes to include human foods and drinks like hamburgers, soda, juice, ice cream, candy and fruit. Contact with these scavengers often produces painful or dangerous stings, and an unpleasant picnic experience.

What's a Yellow Jacket?

Yellow jackets are a type of predatory wasp, and are often confused with other less aggressive species such as paper wasps. Yellow jackets are short and stout and about 1/2 inch long with yellow and black bands on the abdomen. Paper wasps are slender with long dangling legs. Wasps are generally smooth bodied, lacking the hairs that cover the bodies of bees. The yellow jacket has a smooth stinger that can be used to sting multiple times, whereas the honeybee has a barbed stinger that can be used only once. Unlike honeybees, yellow jackets don't store food in their nests, but instead hunt for food as they need it. During early summer, the workers seek meat-based foods for the developing young; later in the season their tastes turn to sweets.

Life Cycle

Yellow jackets are social insects that live in paper-lined comb nests found underground, in hollow trees or under eaves of houses. A solitary queen begins building a nest early in the spring. She lays several eggs that mature to infertile female



adult workers who forage, feed the larvae and defend the queen and colony. The population quickly grows to several hundred. By the end of summer, the colony produces males, which mate with the next generation of fertile females, the future queens. With the onset of cold weather, most of the parent colony will die off. Fertilized queens will shelter for the winter and begin a new colony cycle in the spring. Yellow jacket nests are abandoned after one year, and rarely reused the following spring.

Pesky Behavior

Yellow jackets become a nuisance to humans when they invade our picnics and barbeques, and when they frequent trash cans and hummingbird feeders located outdoors near human activity.

Yellow jackets are also known to enter and rob beehives of honey if given the opportunity. They can become a major stress on weak honeybee colonies that cannot protect their food stores.

What Can You Do?

There are many environmentally friendly things you can do to lower your risk of painful or dangerous contact with yellow jackets.

★ **Cover trash cans** with a tight sealing lid.

★ **Use cups with lids.**

Keep food covered until it is ready to be consumed.

★ **Do not wear perfumes** or scented sunscreens, lotions, etc.

★ **Don't swat** at a yellow jacket, as this can aggravate it. Instead, move slowly away from the insect, and if possible remove/cover what is attracting it.

★ **Don't squash a yellow jacket.** When crushed, the yellow jacket emits a chemical that can attract others.

★ **Trap your guests.**

Commercially sold traps invite yellow jackets with a sweet attractant. Exhausted yellow jackets fall into the liquid and drown. You can substitute tuna-flavored cat food or juice in the traps if the commercial bait doesn't seem to be working. Place traps around the periphery of your recreational area in advance of outdoor activities. Be sure to empty reusable traps daily to reduce odor and escaping wasps. This can be done safely by submerging the traps in a bucket of soapy water or placing traps in a plastic bag in the sun.

Do not disturb nests unless they pose an immediate threat to humans or pets. If you decide to eliminate problem nests with insecticide, use only an approved yellow jacket spray. Read the label for safe application. Always treat nests at night. Light may attract yellow jackets so avoid using a flashlight if possible.

Do not pour gasoline down a nest hole. This is hazardous and environmentally unsound.

Enjoy your picnic!