

Why use Mason Bees?

What are Mason Bees?

Mason Bees are found naturally all over North America. There are 402 species that live in the United States. We tend not to notice them because they are dark blue in color and look like large flies.

Mason bees are different than honey bees and bumble bees because they do not have a queen, do not make hives, and do not make honey. Because they do not have these things to protect, they normally don't sting and are safe around children and pets.

These bees are not affected by the mite that has devastated the honey bee population in the United States, and they do not mate with the aggressive African bees that have moved north from South America.

What are Mason Bees good for?

The benefit of Mason Bees is that they are excellent pollinators, **120 times more effective than honey bees or bumble bees**. This is because those bees have a colony to support and carry most of the pollen they collect back to the hive. Mason Bees do not have a hive so all of the pollen they collect stays with them. Plus they are more "scruffy" than honey bees - they have a lot of hair on their bodies and don't bother to clean it very much - so as they go from flower to flower they pick up lots of pollen and transfer it to more flowers.

Mason Bees are also early risers, they emerge in early Spring when temperatures are still cold, long before honey bees become active. This is typically when fruit trees begin to bloom. All this increased pollination will improve the yield on fruit trees and increase the quantity and quality of blooms on flowering plants and herbs.

Where do Mason Bees live?

Mason Bees are often referred to as "solitary bees" because they do not make hives or have a social structure like other bees. They prefer to find holes in wood or walls that have been made by other insects. They clean out these holes and lay their eggs in them. They start at the back, deposit an egg and a little pollen and nectar, and then build a wall to seal in the egg. This wall building is why they are called "mason" bees. They repeat this process about 8 to 10 times for each tunnel they use, filling it up. They cover up the entrance with mud to protect the eggs from other insects and weather.

The eggs will hatch into larvae and feed on the pollen and nectar while maturing in their little protective cell. They pupate in the cell and then emerge from the tunnel as adult Mason Bees, about half male and half female. They quickly begin foraging for food and mating with other Mason Bees which starts the process again.

How can Mason Bees be encouraged to stay in an area?

Orcon has joined forces with Oxford Bee Company, a spinout from Oxford University, to make Mason Bee habitats available for the home gardener. These bee habitats were designed by Oxford Bee after years of research on the most effective shape for use by the bees. When female Mason Bees find the tubes in these habitats, it's like finding a new condo that doesn't have to be cleaned out, so they just move right in!

