

Wasps

The most aggressive stinging insect is the wasp. It attacks more readily, can sting more than once, and has a much more varied diet, putting it in contact with humans far more often. Many wasps catch and eat other insects and feed on a variety of fallen fruit, nectar, and sugar.

Telling bees and wasps apart

Although roughly the same size, there are distinct differences. The most obvious is colour – wasps (above left) are a bright yellow with black stripes. They are thinner with sharp, tapered abdomens and are interested in food, especially sweet food.

The honey bee (right) is much darker – mostly black with light tan banding. They are generally plumper, furry, mild mannered and interested in flowers, not bins or wrappers.

Most people who think they are being bothered by bees aren't – it's wasps.



What to Expect

To look after the bees, I'll spend a few minutes inspecting them each week to check their health and wellbeing. I'll also be doing my best to prevent them swarming. In the Autumn, all being well, I'll hope to collect some honey.

More information

If you'd like to know more, would like to get involved or have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me.

Alternatively, the Internet is a wonderful resource. Try 'honey bee' in Google, the excellent faq at <http://www.britishbee.org.uk/faq.php>, Wikipedia.org, or The Guardian article at (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/may/13/wildlife.endangeredspecies>) which lists 10 things you can do to help honey bees.



Dear Neighbour,

I am delighted to tell you that I now have a colony of bees at our house and wanted to let you know what that means and reassure you of any concerns you may have.

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Honey Bees

Honey bees in crisis

As I am sure you know, honey bees are in crisis. Wild colonies have virtually died out (none survive more than 3 seasons) and even well managed colonies have been suffering catastrophic losses. Reported losses around the world are as high as 30%, and even here, Government figures put losses around 10%, showing that Britain's beekeepers are struggling to maintain their colonies.



Pollination

Unfortunately, this crisis matters. Bees, and honey-bees in particular, are by far the most significant pollinators of crops, flowers, fruit and vegetables. Without bees, we wouldn't be able to grow the variety of food we eat, and many flowers and trees would struggle to survive. In fact, a staggering **one third** of our food is pollinated by honey bees including onions, apples, pears, strawberries, broccoli, peas, beans, herbs, carrots, sunflowers and too many more to list.

A colony of bees only travels a couple of miles from their hive, so if you have noticed, as I have, the lack of pollinators around your area then you will welcome any addition to their number.

Will they bother me?

The benefits are all very well, but will there be a danger? Well, I certainly don't think so and would not be putting my family at risk if I thought there was.

Here's why. Bees are interested in three things – **pollen, nectar** and **water**; and have evolved a sophisticated civilisation to manage that. A few scout bees are sent out to find the food that the hive requires. When they find it, they take a sample and come back to the hive where they tell the other

bees about it with a complicated 'waggle dance' that communicates the location. They give a sample so that the others know what to look for; then, the flying bees follow the directions and go to collect the food.

This means that honey bees are looking for **specific flowers** in a **specific place** and are not interested in anything else. This is **only true of honey bees** because of their society based civilisation.

Contrary to popular opinion, left alone, honey bees are not dangerous. Recent research in New York shows that "reports of bee stings in the city were minimal and that honeybees did not pose a public health threat".

Stinging

Of course, bees do occasionally sting. However, **unlike wasps**, they are not aggressive and will not attack without good reason.

They only actively seek out and sting when they perceive the **hive** to be **threatened**. Even when their hive is being worked by a beekeeper, the bees are surprisingly calm - it may surprise you that I have never been stung while beekeeping – in fact, my only bee sting was grabbing a handful of oregano from the garden and crushing a bee in the process!

If you come across a honey bee that is away from the hive foraging for nectar or

pollen, she will rarely sting, except when stepped on or roughly handled. And if they do sting, the venom is only dangerous to those who are allergic, unless a victim receives a large number of stings. An individual bee can generally only sting once, and then she will die.

What about swarms?

Bees swarm to reproduce, and one of the primary cares of a good beekeeper is to **prevent swarms** – not least because swarms almost never survive in the wild. Bees do not swarm on a whim – they have prepared themselves by rearing a new queen and gorging themselves on honey to prepare for the journey. This means they are **particularly docile** and **non-aggressive** in this state, if not pestered or interfered with.

They leave the hive and wait while scouts start to look for a new home. When one is found the whole colony will then leave and move in.

A swarm of bees will be reasonably calm and in a tight ball up to the size of a rugby ball. If there are just a lot of insects flying in a particular spot, it's not likely to be a swarm and they are probably not bees.

