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Africanized Honey Bees: How to Bee-Proof Your Home

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With the arrival of the Africanized honey bee in Arkansas, it is important to know what you can do to prevent bees from establishing a colony in your house or yard.

How Honey Bees Establish New Colonies

Honey bees are social creatures that live in groups of up to 60,000 individuals. At certain times of the year, part of a colony separates from the rest and flies out looking for a new home. While on the move, the bees are called a "swarm." The swarming bees may rest in a large group out in the open, such as on a tree branch, and then move on to another site. Once they have found a suitable place to settle down, the bees will begin to build a many-celled wax structure called a "comb." An established colony with comb and brood is much more defensive.

Africanized honey bees are also known to move their entire colony to a more suitable site, a process called "absconding."

How to Prevent Honey Bee Colony Establishment

The best way to prevent bees from establishing a colony on your property is to deny them an ideal environment for survival. Honey bees require three things in order to survive: food, water and shelter. Honey bees use nectar and pollen from flowers as food. Honey bees visit swimming pools, hot tubs and pet and livestock watering dishes/tanks to consume water, not only for themselves but also to take back to cool the hive. They nest in a wide variety of locations, such as animal burrows, overturned flower pots, cavities in trees or rocks, irrigation valve boxes, drainage tiles, discarded automobile parts or appliances and in walls of homes. They may enter openings as small as 3/16 inch in diameter (about the size of a pencil eraser) as long as there is a suitable-sized cavity behind the opening for a nest.

Eliminate shelter.

To prevent bees from settling in your house or yard, you will need to be vigilant for potential nesting sites.

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- Fill or cover all holes 1/8 inch in diameter or larger in trees, structures and block walls.
- Caulk cracks in walls, in the foundation and in the roof.
- Check where the chimney meets the house for separation, and make sure chimneys are covered properly.
- Put window screen over drains, attic vents and irrigation valve boxes.
- Remove any trash or debris that might serve as a shelter for bees, such as overturned clay pots, automobile parts, tires, old appliances, cardboard boxes or stacks of crates.
- Fill or cover animal burrows in the ground.
- Make sure window and sun screens are tight-fitting.
- Keep shed doors tightly closed and in good repair, and exercise caution when entering buildings that are not used frequently.

Monitor water sources.

It will be difficult to prevent access to water sources near manmade lakes, but in your yard you may:

- Discourage bees from visiting evaporative coolers by placing a few ounces of pine-scented cleaner in the water.
- Add 2 tablespoons of vinegar per gallon of water to discourage bees from pet water or bird baths.
- Cover or drain pools or tubs when not in use.
- Repair leaky faucets and faulty irrigation systems.

Removing flowers as a source of food is generally not effective nor recommended, and individual bees gathering pollen and nectar from flowers should be left alone. Bees are very important because they pollinate many plants, including crops such as cucumbers, squash and citrus. In fact, about a third of our daily diet is attributed to insect pollinators.

Inspect your home and yard monthly for signs of bee colonies.

A single bee or just a few bees in your yard does not necessarily mean you have a colony in your yard, because bees will fly some distance in search of food and water. Look for numbers of bees passing into and out of or hovering in front of an opening, and listen for the hum of active insects. Look low for colonies in or at the ground line and also high for colonies under eaves or in attics.

If you do find an established bee colony in your neighborhood, don't panic. On the other hand, don't ignore them either. Small colonies that have recently swarmed may be docile at first but tend to become more defensive with age, so you should have colonies around the home removed as soon as possible. Keep everyone away from the colony. **If you do find a swarm or an established bee colony in your neighborhood, keep everyone away from the bees.** Contact your local Cooperative Extension Office or the Arkansas State Plant Board directly (501-225-1598) for instructions.

Do not try to remove colonies yourself! NEVER shoot, throw rocks at, pour gasoline on, burn or otherwise threaten established honey bee colonies.

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