

Spring Brings Honey Bees in Some Unwanted Places: *Homes*



Homeowners are often surprised and alarmed when a swarm of honey bees appears on a small tree or shrub near their homes. Usually a swarm of bees is temporary and should not alarm you. You can think of a swarm on a tree or shrub as the honey bees' resting stop.

Swarming

In Mississippi, the prime swarming season is from mid-March near the Gulf Coast to mid-May in the north. But small swarms can still occur in the summer months. A swarm is a medium to large group of honey bees looking for a new home.

Where did the honey bees come from?

Swarming is nature's way of increasing the honey bee population in an area. The swarm (worker bees and old queen) came from the original location (such as a hollow tree, old building or barn, someone's attic, beekeeper's bee yard), where about half of the honey bees stay with the new queen honey bee. Normal nesting sites are enclosed areas, where the honey bees are protected from the environment (sunlight, wind, and rain).

Should I be afraid of a swarm?

No, but use caution, and stay some distance from the swarm. Also, use common sense. A swarm flying in the air or a cluster of honey bees as big as a basketball on a small tree may look scary, but most of the honey bees are docile. One out of 30 swarms are aggressive, though, especially if they are out of honey, have experienced bad weather, or have built a honeycomb.

Before the honey bees leave their original home, they eat lots of honey to sustain them while finding their new home. Honey bees are docile when full of honey and no longer have a home to defend.

How long will the swarm stay?

Usually, a swarm will stay just a few hours, but several days is not uncommon. As the swarm clusters on the tree or branch, several scout bees (worker honey bees) are surveying the area for a suitable home or nesting site.

What options do I have with a swarm?

Do nothing: usually, the swarm leaves once the scout bees find a permanent location for the colony. Call a beekeeper: Look in the telephone directory yellow pages under honey, beekeeping, or bee removal. To locate a beekeeper in Mississippi, visit www.mshoneybee.org.

Honey Bees in a House

Sometimes a swarm will decide your house will make a good location for their new colony. Honey bees can cause many problems if you let them establish. They may enter behind the chimney, under loose boards on the eave of a house, inside holes cut in the brick for the gas or air conditioner line, and many other places.

Preventive options

Buy a foaming spray (such as Great Stuff®) at a discount, home improvement, or hardware store. Fill in all cracks and holes in the brick (gas and air conditioner lines), cracks around windows and chimney, and water faucets. Caution: wear gloves when using a foaming spray. Every year, check for and re nail loose boards, replace any warped boards, and seal all open spaces with caulking or foaming spray.

What options do I have if honey bees are in my house?

Call a beekeeper. If the honey bees are easy to get to on the outside of your house, beekeepers may remove

them. But if the honey bees are in your house, most beekeepers cannot remove the honey bees, since they do not have the proper equipment. Also, many beekeepers don't have time nor experience to make the needed repairs once the honey bees are removed.

Call a pest control company. This is the best option when honey bees are in a house. Honey bees do not fly at night, so most of them are inside your house early in the morning or late in the evening. To kill a majority of the bees, ask the pest control company to make your house their first job of the morning or last job of the evening. Some pest control companies may tell homeowners it is illegal to kill honey bees, because they are the official state insect of Mississippi. But it is not illegal to kill the insects in homes or structures.

Dead bees, fermented honey, and pollen smell bad, so you need to remove the entire honeycomb and bees from behind the wall. Secondary pests such as ants, wax moths, and dermestid beetles may move in if you don't remove honey, wax, and dead bees. You may need to hire a building repair contractor for this step of the process.

Also, if the honeycomb is left in the wall, new swarms next spring may reoccupy that site, because the new honey bees are attracted to the smell of the leftover beeswax. The number of honey bees in a new colony increases very fast in the spring, so the quicker you fix the problem, the better. Honey bee colonies in a house, if left alone, can increase to 40,000 bees or greater with large amounts of honey and pollen present.

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