

Guidance Note

Carpenter Bees and how to control them

October 2020



South African Wood Preservers Association



Carpenter bees are species in the genus *Xylocopa* that include some 500 bees and are found on every continent except Antarctica. They resemble bumble bees as they are similar in size, i.e. 12-25 mm long, but they are not bumble bees. They are mainly black in colour but can range from greenish black to blueish black or purple in colour, with white or yellow markings on the top of their bodies.

The name carpenter bee is derived from their nesting habits, as they frequently burrow into wood. These burrows or tunnels are nests used to raise their young ones and are constructed into separate compartments for each bee larvae.



In residential and built up areas they tend to make their burrows into the overhanging roof rafters. Raising of the young is seasonal and therefore the bees will return annually, and in many cases they will make more than one return, which leads to the expansion of their burrows. Over many years the damage can become extensive and can eventually lead to structural failure.

Carpenter bees do not ingest or eat the wood, so they are not your typical wood destroying insects like wood borers or termites that attack wood as a source of food. Since the wood is not a source of food, they can even burrow into pressure treated

wood, e.g. CCA treated timber or poles. One often hears that by applying creosote or carbolineum on the surface of the wood helps to keep the bees away, but there are also many reports to the contrary.

To effectively control carpenter bees, you have two options. Option one requires the use of a contact insecticide that can be applied by spraying it directly onto the bees as they move in and out of their nests. This, however, only deals with the ones that are sprayed. Once the insecticide that has been sprayed into the hole has evaporated, it loses its effectiveness. It also has virtually no effect on the young ones who are snugly protected within their separate closed off compartments. To effectively deal with them one must apply a generous amount of a gel-based insecticide into the burrow. A homemade mixture of petroleum jelly and an insecticide can also be made. After applying the gel-based poison, the hole must be closed with a dowel. This will ensure that any adult bee coming into contact with the gel will die, and when the young ones are ready to leave the nest, they will also have to get past the gel and will die when trying to eat through the dowel.

Option two does not require any insecticide but entails the use of a “carpenter bee trap” which allows the bees to enter but does not allow them to leave again, with subsequent starvation. The trap is simply a square box made of wood, e.g. SA Pine, with 12 mm holes drilled on the sides. The holes are drilled at a slight upward angle so that rainwater is kept out, like the method used by the bees when making the entrance to their own burrows. An empty transparent container, e.g. plastic water bottle is attached over an opening at the bottom of the trap so that it can easily be removed to empty the bottle from any captured and dead bees. The bees are attracted to light and will therefore tend move from the box into the transparent container without being able to get out again.



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