LOG & TIMBER HOMES COUNCIL
National Association of Home Builders
1201 15th Street
Washington, D.C 20005
1-800-368-5242, Ext. 8577
FAX: (202) 266-8141
www.loghomes.org

LOG TECH NOTE 02-01

Controlling Carpenter Bees

Carpenter bees are solitary bees that do not live in hives. They are big black bees that look like bumblebees but have bare, shiny backs whereas the bumblebee's back is hairy. Male carpenter bees often frighten people with their aggressive behavior but since they have no stinger, they are essentially harmless. Females have a stinger but only use it if molested.

The main complaint about carpenter bees is the round holes they drill into logs, fascia boards, eaves, decks, and other unpainted wood surfaces. Although they prefer softwoods such as cedar, redwood, or cypress, they will happily attack spruce, pine, and fir. Even pressure treated wood is occasionally attacked. As the bee drills into the wood, coarse sawdust may be seen coming out of the hole or piling up beneath. Carpenter bees do not eat wood; they only drill into it for nesting purposes.

Most carpenter bee activity occurs in early spring when male and female bees emerge after spending the winter in old nest tunnels. Once they have paired and mated, the female bee drills into a suitable site while the male stays nearby to ward off intruders. Once the initial hole is drilled through the surface, the bee will make a turn and excavate a tunnel along the grain of the wood. This tunnel, which may run for several inches, becomes the cavity where the female deposits her eggs. Several eggs are laid in individual chambers separated by plugs of pollen on which the larvae feed until they emerge as adults. In addition to making new holes, carpenter bees also enlarge old tunnels and if left unattended for several years, serious damage to a wood member may result.

In late fall, activity may again be seen as both male and female carpenter bees clean out old cavities where they over-winter. Since carpenter bees tend to migrate back to the same area from which they emerged, it is important to implement some control measures to prevent wood members from becoming riddled by these bees.

Prevention

Although carpenter bees prefer bare wood, they will attack wood that is stained. Painted wood surfaces, on the other hand, are less frequently attacked since the bees must see or feel the grain of the wood in order to recognize it as wood. Carpenter bees may be deterred from chewing into wood by spraying pesticides such as Bayer Advanced Home/Lawn & Garden Insect Killer, Spectracide Bug Stop, and Ortho Home Defense System onto wood surfaces. However, **the effectiveness of these applications is only about 7 to 14 days** so the treatment will have to be repeated every so often. These products should only be used during the periods of peak activity in the spring and perhaps again in late fall. Be sure to follow label directions and read and understand any precautions that must be taken when using these products.

One of the most effective measures for preventing carpenter bee activity is to discourage the FIRST hole. Once activity starts, more bees are attracted to the area and generations of bees will propagate. An ***insecticide*** additive and an insect ***repellent*** additive are options available for mixing into paints and stains. The insecticide will poison insects crawling or boring on treated surfaces while a natural botanical will repel insects from landing on treated surfaces. Both products can be added to the coating and applied with the stain treatment. Contact your stain supplier to see if either of these options are available for use with the finish treatment of your choice.

Treating Carpenter Bee Holes

The way to treat an existing hole and tunnel depends on the time of year and if the bee is present at the time of treatment. If the female is drilling away at the time, you find the hole (you can see sawdust coming out or hear her working inside), spray a contact pesticide like wasp and hornet spray into the hole. She will quickly back out and die. Immediately fill the hole with caulk or putty. If the hole is empty or you are not sure if there is a bee in the tunnel, insert some pesticide dust such as Sevin or boric acid into the hole and leave it open for a few days so the bee contacts and distributes the pesticide throughout the tunnels. Then fill and seal the hole.

If you find carpenter bee holes in the summer months, it's difficult to tell if there are bee larvae developing in the tunnels. The best thing to do is to run a length of flexible wire into the tunnels to break through the pollen plugs separating the chambers. Then spray an aerosol pesticide or insert some dust into the hole and seal it up. The same thing should be done on holes found in the fall or winter to kill any bees that may be over-wintering.

There are several carpenter bee control kits available from various sources on the Internet. Most contain an insecticide dust, applicator, and something to plug the holes. You can give them a try or make your own. The key to carpenter bee control is not so much what you use as knowing how and when to use it.

By Vincent R. Palmere, Perma-Chink Systems, Inc., Knoxville, TN and edited by Barbara Murray, CTA Products Group, Southhaven, MS. Published by the Technical Committee of the Log & Timber Homes Council, Building Systems Councils, National Association of Home Builders