**Brian Maddy, County Extension Agent**

**The Loneliest Bees, the Solitary Bee**

**We’ve all heard about what’s happening to the honey bees. The colony collapse disorder which has depleted the population of honey bees nationwide has been in the news for the past several years. Honey bees both wild and managed have died from a combination of issues: parasites, pesticides, habitat deterioration and disease. What do bees do that is so important? Pollination is what makes the plant world go around. When bees visit flowers to collect the nectar for food for their offspring, pollen is inadvertently collected on their fuzzy bodies. As they visit from flower to flower they transfer the pollen from flower to flower in a process called pollination. Good pollination increase yields, makes larger fruit and tastier fruit. Honey bees add $ 14 billion dollars to the value of American grown produce. What we call honey bees in the United States are actually European bees from Italy or Russia that were brought here to help pollinate crops.**

**As the number of honey bees declined, the importance of the non-honey bee has grown in importance in relation to pollination. These non-honey bees are also called pollen bees or solitary bees. They don’t live in large colonies. As their name suggests there is only one female per nest although they may live side by side as in an apartment complex. 90% of all types of bees are solitary bees. In North America alone there are over 3500 species of pollen bees. A good example of a solitary bee is the carpenter bee.**

**The big hairy bluish-black bumble bee buzzing around the flowers in your yard is called the carpenter bee. The female carpenter bee drills nice neat almost ½ inch holes in wood. This tunnel can be ten inches long. This non-aggressive bee normally nests in dead tree trunks, firewood or exposed wood around the house. It likes unpainted wood but will drill into painted wood if desperate enough. The male bees are similar in size to the females but are blond or tan colored and do act aggressively, but they can’t sting. Only female bees and wasps have stingers.**

**After the female carpenter bee makes its ten inch tunnel, it then visits all the local flowers in the neighborhood to gather pollen and nectar. She rolls the pollen into a ball, pushes it to the back of the tunnel, lays an egg, and plugs the end with sawdust and other materials. She repeats the process until the tunnel is filled. Each compartment is about one inch long. What is unique about the carpenter bees is that the baby bees hatch in reverse order of being laid. The bees can leave without disturbing their brothers and sisters. Isn’t Mother Nature wonderful?**

**Other types of solitary bees are the metallic blue or green sweat bees. They have a habit which has not been explained of licking sweat from people and animals. They also gather pollen for their offspring and place it in underground chambers where they lay their eggs on the pollen balls.**

**Solitary bees tend to be less defensive because they don’t have large nests to defend like honey bees. Most females won’t sting unless trapped or threatened. There is really no reason to control solitary bees. They pollinate crops and plants when other social bees, honey bees, are inactive. Polyester and Southeastern blueberry bees pollinate blueberry crops. The squash bees pollinate cucurbit crops: cucumbers, watermelons, pumpkins and squash. Don’t disturb or destroy their nests. Hitting them with tennis rackets is not a good idea either. If you have a problem with bees around the porch and there are no flowers to pollinate, light a citronella candle. It may work and keep the bees busy doing what they do best, pollinating.**

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