

Blue Orchard Mason Bees (*Osmia Lignaria Propinqua* Cresson) are welcome super pollinators in any garden or orchard.

Mason Bees primarily pollinate fruit trees, holly, and early-blooming nut trees, such as almonds. They also pollinate blueberries, blackberries, strawberries and raspberries; and flowers, including azaleas, begonias, camellias and rhododendrons.

The Orchard Mason Bee does not make honey; but, they make up for that by being much more effective pollinators than honey bees. They are incredible spring pollinators, while honey bees are warm and hot-weather pollinators.

A few mason bees can pollinate a fruit tree compared to several thousand honey bees; resulting in 95-percent pollination success by mason bees and only 5-percent by honey bees. This is because the mason bee is physically adapted to collect more pollen than nectar; whereas the honey bee collects more nectar than pollen.

It only takes a few dollars and minutes to set up mason bees, compared to a much greater financial investment in a honey bee hive.

Both mason and honey bees may sting. However, a mason bee rarely stings. This only happens when you pinch or handle the female roughly, or she gets caught in your clothing. A mason bee sting is similar to a mosquito bite.

The Blue Orchard Mason Bee normally establishes its home in the wild. They cannot make their own nesting holes; so they rely on nature. Woodpeckers and wood-boring insects provide many of their nesting holes. You will find mason bees setting up residence in hollow stems, stumps, knotholes, snags, tree limbs, and even driftwood and fence posts. They have also adapted to living under cedar shingles and siding. But, don't worry. Mason bees are not destructive wood-eating insects like termites and beetles.

Nesting holes in which mason bees live are partitioned like apartments. Pollen, nectar and an egg are laid in each partition, and capped with a mud plug. That's where the name "mason," or "mud bee" comes from. Female eggs are laid in the back third, and male eggs in the front two-thirds of each nesting hole, or tube.

Anyone can raise mason bees by creating homes for them. All it requires is a sharp 5/16-inch brad-point drill bit, an untreated 4x4-inch wood block, and a little time and patience. Most commercial-made mason bee blocks are 8-inches long; but you can make yours slightly longer, if you please. Use good quality, dry, seasoned wood with as few cracks as possible; such as fir, pine or spruce.

Measure all holes 3/4-inch on center, and drill to within a half-inch of the back of the wood block. DO NOT treat your mason bee wood blocks. You may paint them, but do so beforehand, allowing the paint to thoroughly dry before drilling holes.

Waxed or uncoated nesting tubes may also be used to raise mason bees. Place them in a clean tin can (capped at one end), or a PVC tube (also capped at one end). DO NOT use plastic drinking straws, as they may cause fungus and disease detrimental to mason bees.

Place mason bee blocks, or nesting tubes, in a dry, sunny location on the East or Southeast side of your house or outbuilding, with minimal exposure to wind and rain.

Mason bees fly up to 100-yards from their nesting area, which is equivalent to the size of a football field, or a city block. Two-hundred-fifty (250) mason bees are needed to pollinate a one-acre garden or orchard.

The Orchard Mason Bee thrives in our cool, damp Pacific Northwest climate. Their emergence varies spring to spring, depending on both the climate and the blossoming of their food source. Generally, they emerge from mid-March to early April, and are active into May. They have a life span of 6-8 weeks.

Mason bees are sensitive to chemicals, herbicides and pesticides. DO NOT spray them or their nesting and habitat areas. If you must spray, do so well before and after their nesting season. Birds, bugs, fungus and diseases are detrimental to mason bees. Follow necessary precautions advised in mason bee books and agricultural bulletins.

Various mason bee species are native to North America. The Horned Mason Bee has been imported from Japan, and successfully adapted to pollination in the United States.

Considerable information is available on mason bees. Contact your local Cooperative Extension Service and Master Gardeners. Visit your library, local nurseries, and gardening shows. Or, research them on the internet.

Mason bee books and products are available at local and internet businesses, beekeeping suppliers, and gardening catalogs.

Share your interest in mason bees with your children and grandchildren, relatives, friends, neighbors, and fellow gardeners.

The Orchard Mason Bee is a gentle, non-aggressive pollinator. They will provide countless enjoyable hours of observation. And, reward you with increased yields thanks to their super pollinating efforts.

