

Mud Sources for Mason Bees

Springtime mud sources abound for orchard mason bees in the maritime Pacific Northwest. However, drier North American climates may require that a mud source be provided.

A female mason bee makes eight to twelve trips to build each mud cell in the nesting chamber, with a final mud cap at the entrance hole. Collecting and transporting mud takes between eight and twenty-four minutes, as each mud trip is one to two minutes. Naturally, a convenient mud source nearby decreases mud duty, and increases pollination. Collecting nectar and pollen for each nesting cell takes 10 to 15 minutes.

Making mud cells and caps is why mason bees are often called mud bees. Mason bees use mud to shape and modify nest size, create a chamber within a cavity, and reduce cavity size. Mud cells and caps are also nature's defense to keep out parasites and predators. Birds, for example, may be able to peck out the entrance mud cap, and reach the first cocoon in the nesting chamber. Remaining nesting cells further back are protected by mud cells.

Dig a shallow trench, up to 16-inches deep, near the mason bee nesting sight to provide an adequate mud supply. Rough up the side walls of the trench. This helps mason bees excavate, or mine, needed mud. Frame and cover the mud pit with a 2 x 2-foot frame of treated 4x4's, or landscape timbers. Cover the top of the frame with chicken wire, or 1.5-inch grid screen. This allows mason bees to easily enter and depart the mud pit, and prevents marauding birds from eating females laden with mud. Add a plastic liner to the mud trench and keep the soil moist throughout the mason bee's nesting season.