

Care of the Mason Bee

- By Larry Church

Spring Placement of the bee box:

Bee boxes work best if placed in a morning sunshine location on a wall or fence to prevent the wind from cooling the bee box. Bees will be active when the day temps reach around 14 C until around the beginning of June. Up to 8 weeks from when they became active. I usually put out a box in early April (although sooner if the weather is warm) and bring the bees out later. When the weather warms up a little more, I will bring out the bees in their boxes. Open the tape over the opening of the box and tape the release box under the bee box (the new clean home). For Comox Valley students, we have an open space above the straws to place the bees for release. The timing can be coordinated to the bloom of peach trees.

Now is also the time to bring out the other cocoons in the clear container. Place this container somewhere you can keep an eye on it, in the house, but so not open the container. Watch to see if a mason Bee emerges, put the container back in the fridge for 30min then bring it back out and release the Mason Bee outside. The cold of the refrigerator will cause the bee to be still long enough to release it outside. If you see a very small flying insect emerge this would-be predator wasps (small like a sugar ant). In this case place in the freezer over night to kill the wasp. The wasps kill Mason Bees and must be destroyed and not released into the wild.

Summer- Removal of the bee box

During the summer the bee box can get too hot with 30 C temperatures. The bees are still in the larval stage and can die if they overheat. When the box is full or there is no activity observed in mid June, move the box to a safe place out of the sun and away from birds. In an unheated garden shed or garage.

Fall- Cleaning of the bees

By this time of the year the bees have matured into adults. They will stay dormant until warmer up in the spring.

Mid September to mid December is the best time to clean the bees and the box. At this time of year, the bees will not wake up if brought into the house to be cleaned. After the new year the bees only need a couple of hours in the warmth of a house to wake up and emerge. If this happens it is too late for these bees, they will not survive.

Start by removing one straw at a time, be careful not to damage the cocoons. Slowly unroll the straw and place the cocoons in a wire colander. When the entire box is empty use the head of a screw driver to scrape the Mason Bee house clean of any debris in preparation for washing.

Now you are ready to clean the cocoons. In your colander roll the cocoons around so that they rub on each other. This will clean most of the debris from the cocoons. When no more debris fall out of the colander it is time to destroy the pile of debris you have created. The pile will have hundreds of thousands of pollen mites in it and they can be killed by a hot water bath before putting it in the compost. Now pour the cocoons and mud walls on the table. At this point you must pick up each cocoon and remove the rest of the mud walls. It is good to handle each cocoon and place them back into the colander to be rolled around again to finish cleaning. When you pick up the cocoons check the texture. The cocoons should be brown and very firm like a large rice crispy. Any cocoons that are soft like a wool sweater should be put aside and not stored away with other cocoons.

The storage of the cocoons should be in a breathable container. I use small cardboard boxes such as toothpaste or jello boxes. Tape up one end so there is no light entering, at the open end cut the flaps so that there is (when closed) an opening approximately 1 cm x 1 cm. Place all clean good cocoons in one cocoon deep layer (lay them flat not stacked). Put the **soft** cocoons in a clear container. Place all cocoon containers in a metal cookie tin (with holes in it) in an unheated dry place for the winter.