

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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If you are a backyard gardener in Washington state and have fruit trees your new best friend could be our native orchard mason bee. Orchard mason bees can help restore the former productivity of your fruit trees, blueberries, and raspberries. Simply provide a nest and they will reproduce and pollinate your fruit trees. In the Pacific Northwest, the reliable indicator is the native Oregon Grape. The Oregon Grape's bright yellow blooms signal the beginning of bee emergence. Our tiny friends, the orchard mason bees are a shiny black color. Sometimes when seen in the sunlight they look to be a shiny blue-black color. The orchard mason resembles a common black fly. However, like all other bees the mason has four wings. Another defining characteristic is that bees have antennae and flies do not. Make sure to check the parts before getting out the fly swatter! You can be confident however that this bee is a well-behaved guest in your garden. The female is capable of a mild sting, which is less troubling than a mosquito bite. The males are extremely harmless.

Mason bees need small dry nesting holes without a second entrance. They will nest in any potential nesting hole made of material such as wood, masonry, or plastic. Placing a bee box is just like setting out a bird box or house. In the spring, see if the local mason bees find and occupy your nest. Some requirements for mason bees are to make sure the nesting holes are at least 13-15 cm deep. This ensures that the correct proportion of males and females are produced. Mason bees need mud to build walls between the eggs and to create a plug at the terminus of the nesting tunnel. These mud walls keep predators and parasites out. The eager bees will collect balls of mud and reward you by sticking around and increasing in numbers. Mason bees readily use nests made out of paper or cardboard straws. There are many plants with hollow stems that are used by nesting bees. Reeds make useful nests as well as cane bamboo. If you become concerned when you see the bee entering cavities under shaker siding or investigating nail holes or other cavities in wood, note that these bees are not destructive insects.

Since these insects do not excavate holes in wood, no controls are recommended since no damage is done. The bees will only clean out loose debris! The best nesting location is above ground, in the sun, protected from wind, rain, and facing east. When nests face east, the early morning sun will warm up the nest and bees. This will encourage the bees to forage earlier in the day or as some would say "get an earlier start" in their workday. Place the nest as close to flowering trees as possible. The greater distances that bees have to travel, between their nest and foraging patch, the less pollinating is completed.

Mason bees are valued because they are native and self-sustaining with minimal maintenance, and therefore, low cost. Another great part of having this new garden friend is the free entertainment they provide for you and your family while watching them work.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.