

Mason Bees—A Native Pollinator

Mason bees are named from their habit of making mud compartments in their nests. Their nests are made in hollow reeds or holes in wood made by wood boring insects. These bees are also known as Blueberry Orchard Bees and are native North American bees.

Mason bees are ideal pollinators for apples, pears, cherries, plums, and related crops. They prefer blossoms of these trees and will work them exclusively when available. One to three active females can adequately pollinate an entire mature tree. The bees will also forage a variety of other garden and landscape flowers for their nectar supply. These include rosemary, lavender and many other herbs, sunflower, Oregon-grape, dandelion, and many others. The mason bee nests need only be within a hundred yards or so of the nearest flowering tree, although the closer the blossoms, the better. It's more important to place the block in a warm, dry, protected spot and not to disturb it unless to move it close to the blossoms.

Building Homes for Mason Bees

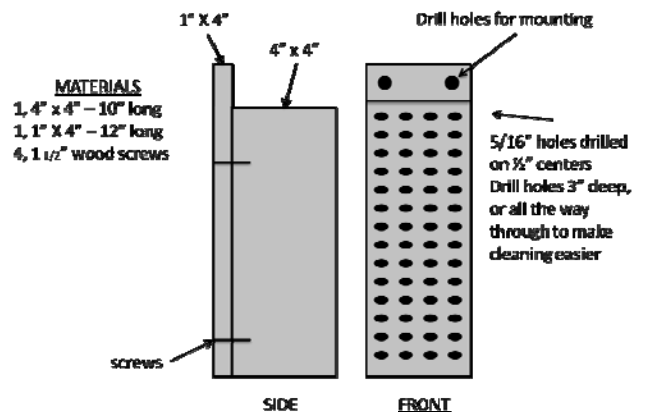
If you wish to develop populations of mason bees to pollinate a home orchard, or just to have around to observe, set out one or more nesting blocks to attract them. A nesting block can be made by drilling holes five-sixteenths inch in diameter, three inches deep, and about one-half inch apart in any untreated 4 X 4 about eight to twelve inches long. For mounting, drill a hole in the back of the block or attach the block to a piece of 1 X 4 that is two inches longer than the 4 X 4 and place it over a nail.

Attach the nesting block to a house or other structure, out of the wind and rain, and preferably in a place that receives morning sunlight. If one spot doesn't work, try another. Put the nest up before the bees begin nesting in February or March. Do not disturb the block as the developing bees are very sensitive.

Mud is a necessary building material for their nests and is why they are called "mason" bees. If no natural mud source is available near the nesting block (this is generally not a problem west of the Cascade Mountains), dig a shallow hole, line it with plastic, and keep it filled with moist soil.

Over several seasons the holes in the block may become fouled with debris, and diseases and parasites may build up. The block can lose its attractiveness and mason bees may "go away". Blocks can be cleaned out manually or the nest holes can be fitted with paper straw inserts that are replaced each year to give the bees a clean nest cavity. Replaceable inserts are available commercially.

You can design your nest block to make it easier to clean each year by drilling the holes completely through the block and providing a removable back. After the bees have left the block in spring, remove the back of the nest block and clean out the individual holes with a 5 percent vinegar and water solution.



More about Mason bees and ways to help pollinators:

Knox Cellar started in Bellingham by Brian Griffith to educate gardeners about the Mason Bee and its value as a pollinator at <http://www.knoxcellars.com/>

Pollinators Pathway, a project by local Seattle gardeners creating a mile-long habitat for pollinators, has a website with great photos of the pollinators and the plants, many of which are native wildflowers. Learn more at: <http://www.pollinatorpathway.com/about/what-is-it>