

Cynthia Brian's Gardening Guide for August

The sting

By Cynthia Brian

"Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee." – Muhammed Ali



Add depth and color to your shade garden with hardy geraniums, ferns, and more.

Photos Cynthia Brian

Every morning I walk through my garden in my flip-flops with a cup of coffee in hand to appreciate nature and to investigate what has transpired in the past 20 hours. On this occasion I saw a small dead limb had fallen near one of my prized David Austin roses. Naturally, I reached down to pick it up. Immediately my left hand felt on fire, as if I had fallen into thorny brambles. Instinctively I shook it and to my horror realized that my hand was covered with at least a dozen yellow jackets.

The stings were painful and I thought quickly, immediately removing my rings and running to the medicine cabinet to swallow two antihistamine tablets. The swelling began within minutes. I then poured vinegar over my hand and forearm and made a poultice from baking soda mixed with water that I slathered over the entire area and placed my hand in a bag of ice to reduce the inflammation. After an hour, hydrocortisone cream was applied, and re-

plied as needed.

Yellow jackets are wasps and are not related to bees. Bees live in hives while yellow jackets create nests. Yellow jacket workers typically have black and yellow stripes one-half-inch long body. They have the ability to sting several times, injecting poisonous venom that causes intense pain, while bees can only sting once because their stinger becomes stuck in the skin of its victim. In early spring, these carnivores hunt for insects keeping caterpillars and other garden pests away. But during warm weather, yellow jackets are out in force scavenging for sugar and food. You'll find them prowling around trash cans, summer picnics, barbecues and outdoor diners. A colony of yellow jackets, sometimes numbering in the thousands, builds nests underground, often using a gopher or rodent burrow as their home. They also create nests in house eaves, in walls, or under decks or porches. If you see a multitude of

flying insects darting in and out, you probably have a nest of yellow jackets. They are aggressive and if provoked, will attack relentlessly, even chasing a person or an animal for great distances. Wasp venom contains an alarm secretion that will alert other yellow jackets to assault the target in an effort to protect the colony. Yellow jackets stings are painful and sometimes can be fatal.

What can you do?

In the event of stinging, be aware of symptoms that may warrant immediate medical attention due to an allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. Besides the localized swelling, pain, and redness from the sting, systemic symptoms include problems breathing or swallowing, dizziness, vomiting, diarrhea, coughing, and wheezing. Call 911. Always seek medical assistance if stung in the mouth or neck. For those who know they are allergic to bees or yellow jackets, it's advised to carry an EpiPen.

When emergency medical intervention is not warranted, try these treatments to reduce the painful effects:

1. Take an antihistamine immediately.
2. Remove rings or jewelry.
3. Pour vinegar on the affected area to act as an astringent.
4. Make a paste of baking soda and water to neutralize the venom.
5. Sprinkle meat tenderizer to reduce swelling and pain. Papain, a papaya enzyme, will break down the venom.
6. Wrap the wound in a cold pack or ice.
7. Apply hydrocortisone cream to reduce swelling and itching.

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A yellow jacket nest in a burrow by the azalea.