

# UK COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY — COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

## YARD WASPS

Lee Townsend, Extension Entomologist

Several wasp species can be found around the yard. Although wasps feed on insects such as house flies and garden pests, some can also be dangerous to people. Most wasps typically ignore people. For example, social insects that live in colonies will readily sting when they perceive their nest or territory is threatened while solitary insects only sting in self-defense when mishandled. In addition, only female wasps can sting. In any case, it is best to regard any wasp with care before attempting to control it, since stings can be very painful. The best and easiest way to tell wasps apart is to look at the relative size of the wasp, and the pattern on the abdomen.



**YELLOW JACKET**

Small wasps include yellow jackets and white grub parasites. Yellow jackets are social insects. Fertilized queens overwinter, then start a colony in the spring and provision the first brood of young. Once the first brood has matured, they will take over the provisioning duties, care for the queen and the following broods throughout the summer. In late summer, reproductive males and females will be produced, which consequently mate and then the females overwinter (colonies always die out at the end of the year). In order to eliminate yellow jacket wasps that are indirect competition with humans, the entire colony or nest must be eliminated. Football-shaped nests may be either in the ground or above ground, and will be paperlike.



White grub parasites, usually of the genus *Scolia*, are solitary wasps. They fly low over lawns in mid- to late summer. They will insert their eggs inside white grubs, which are pests of lawns. The wasp larvae will feed on the grubs as they develop. These wasps are in far less competition with humans. However, they will sting if disturbed.



**CICADA KILLER**

mid- to late summer. The larvae overwinter in their burrows. These wasps generally want nothing to do with humans and will rarely sting, even when bothered.



**VELVET ANT**

Finally, a medium-sized wasp named the velvet ant may also be present in lawns or pastures. These solitary wasps, as the name implies, are densely covered with hair. Males have wings, but females are wingless, and are sometimes confused with ants. Ants, however, have elbowed antennae, and a "hump" in the constriction between the thorax and abdomen. Velvet ants are either shades of brown or red and black, and females will sting if encountered.

### Control

Many aerosol or pressurized sprays are available and provide quick knockdown. The best time to eliminate wasp nests is at night, when most workers are in the hive and resting. It is a good idea to prop a flashlight up, pointing at the entrance of the nest, but spray from a different spot. Wasps will go to the source of light rather than the source of spray. Also, heavy clothing and a bee veil, as well as safety glasses should be worn to prevent stings. After the hive has been thoroughly sprayed, remove the nest so pupae do not reestablish the work force.

Solitary, burrowing wasps like the cicada killer look for sparse, sandy soil to provision their offspring. Adequate fertilizer and watering will provide thick turf and could dissuade the cicada killers from burrowing. With severe infestations, or if young children are a concern, chemical control may be desired to remove any chance of stinging. Carbaryl (Sevin) applied to burrowed areas, following label directions for turf pests, can reduce infestations.

#### Additional Information

- ENTFACT 600 - *The European Hornet in Kentucky*
- ENTFACT 004 - *Cicada Killer Wasp*
- ENTFACT 606 - *Controlling Nuisance Bees*
- ENTFACT 620 - *Controlling wasps, hornets, and yellow jackets*