

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO BY William M. Johnson

**Paper wasps are beneficial insects although they are generally considered to be pests because of their ability to sting. Wasps can become a problem from mid-summer to in autumn when they may disrupt many outdoor activities.**

William Cowper, an 18th century English poet, is credited with the following quote: "I am monarch of all I survey, My right there is none to dispute. . ."

I admit to taking on a similar self-centered perspective of "I am master of my landscape and things therein" when walking through my home landscape.

However, that attitude was strongly challenged at 6:23 p.m. last Thursday. Another character had assumed a similar attitude although she surveyed a more limited area of real estate but it was still within my real estate. This character had six legs,

two wings and packs a stinger. Entomologists call this insect *Polistes exclamans*.

They are commonly called paper wasps by most homeowners and, yes, they can sting. Most folks have experienced the sting of a paper wasp at some point of their life, either when a kid or as an adult. Either way it was not likely a pleasant feeling.

Of all the insects that you may encounter in a home landscape or garden, none evoke a more visceral, negative reaction. I most certainly had bad thoughts (even some unprintable

thoughts) at 6:23 p.m. last Thursday. Even so, I still remain an advocate for paper wasps for I know their value as beneficial insects.

When the term "beneficial insect" is mentioned, lady beetles or ladybugs are most likely what most gardeners will think of. Many other types of beneficial insects are at work in just about every landscape and garden. It's just that most folks are not likely to recognize the myriad variety of beneficial insects that occur in our landscapes and gardens.

Check the Master Garden-



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er website listed with this column to learn more about beneficial insects in our area. Paper wasps are beneficials although on occasion they make it difficult for me to advocate for them.

I digress, so back to my reality column regarding my encounter at 6:23 p.m. last Thursday. I was walking through my backyard near a wood fence that separates my domain from that of my neighbor to the east. I felt a sharp, burning tinge on my left elbow. I immediately knew it to be the sting of an insect.

As I quickly glanced back, I saw a single paper wasp flying back to its nest after delivering its payload. The attacker was most likely a female paper wasp as male wasps do not sting.

Paper wasp stings are no fun even for a horticulturist who on any other occasion serves as their advocate. I remained calm (though pained) and quickly surmised that paper wasps would be the subject of this week's garden column. I resisted the urge to inflict a decisive shock and awe retaliation response on the wasp nest. I intended for this opportunity to become a teachable moment for my readers. Before detailing the punishment phase, allow me to expound further on the benefits provided by paper wasps.

Paper wasps construct the familiar, open-celled paper nests we often see suspended from eaves or porch ceilings. Paper wasps do serve an important ecological purpose as predators of other insects. They collect caterpillars, beetle larvae, and other insect prey to feed their young.

Paper wasps can become a problem especially during late summer to early autumn when they may disrupt many outdoor activities. Before you do anything to get rid of paper wasps around your home, ask yourself if you can tolerate their presence and leave them alone.

I figured that there were at least 9,867 individuals on the nest from which the attacker flew from last week. An unemotional, postmortem count revealed the population on the nest to consist of a mere 9 individuals.

Paper wasps help keep hungry caterpillars and other plant pests in check, benefitting your landscape and garden. Nest size varies and colonies can range from a half-dozen or to several dozen individuals during mid to late-summer.

A single colony of paper wasps can consume 2,000+ caterpillars over a summer season to feed their developing young. That's an impressive amount of insect control provide free-of-charge.

If a paper wasp nest is located on your property but away from high use areas, consider leaving them alone. While they can sting, they only do so in response to a direct or perceived threat. Humans and paper wasps can often coexist peacefully.

Obviously, when someone in your household has a wasp venom allergy, you may need to remove wasp nests to minimize the risk of an allergic reaction to a sting. If a nest is located near an entrance to your home, or by a porch or deck where you spend a lot of time, or in high traffic areas in your yard, you may need to take action to control pa-

per wasps.

Usually an aerosol spray of one of the many fast-acting wasp killers will quickly kill all workers present on the nest. Apply an aerosol spray during very late evening or very early morning when the wasps are settled in to reduce the chance of being stung.

Motion picture movies featuring animals typically has a tag in the closing credits stating that "No animal was harmed in the making of this film."

Wasps also belong to the Animal Kingdom and I am compelled to provide full disclosure as follows: a) paper wasps were harmed in the course of preparing this news column; b) the Galveston County AgriLife Extension Horticulture Agent was also harmed which induced the action outlined in "item a" above to occur; and c) retaliation was not exacted from any neighboring paper wasps nests.

I tried to identify the perpetrator of my venomous assault last Thursday from the lineup in the photo I took of the nest before a final judgment was implemented. I think the paper wasp on the left side of the nest with the beady eyes was the guilty one.

Paper wasps, like many things, have an upside as well as a downside.

