



What should you know about mason bees?

Gardeners everywhere are buzzing about orchard mason bees (*Osmia lignaria*)—and for good reason. A native cousin to the European honeybee, the mason bee is a remarkably efficient pollinator. You'd need an army of 120,000 honeybees, for instance, to pollinate an acre of apple trees, whereas mason bees could do the same job with a team of 1,200. Better yet, mason bees don't swarm and almost never sting because they don't have a hive of honey to protect. It's no wonder that so many gardeners are posting up nesting houses to attract these gentle spring bees to their gardens. But if owners don't care for them properly, these bee houses can do more harm than good.

All mason-bee houses require a little yearly upkeep. Each October, the cocoons (which contain overwintering adult bees) should be collected, placed in a container, and stored until spring. If the cocoons are left unharvested, pests will slowly take over each hole, and within a few years, the bees will either die or move out. Harvesting the good guys (cocoons) and tossing out the bad guys (pests) is all that's needed to boost the bees' numbers. Follow these simple steps (sidebar, facing page), and you'll not only ease the honeybee crisis but also reap the benefits of setting dozens of mason bees loose on your spring bloomers.

—David Hunter is the owner of Crown Bees, a company in Woodinville, Washington.