

KINGMAN IS GROWING! Column

BEES – Good Guys or Bad Guys??

By *Linda Reddick*, Kingman Area Master Gardener

Spring has sprung, flowers blooming, and bees are buzzing. The question is, are those bees friend or foe?

More than 100 agricultural crops in the U.S. are pollinated by bees. If you are growing fruit trees or a vegetable garden you definitely want bees for pollination of many of your fruits and vegetables like; watermelons cantaloupe, squash, peaches etc. While they are collecting nectar moving from flower to flower they are also pollinating. In general most European honey bees are docile creatures just content on doing their job. Foraging bees away from their colony are not likely to sting unless they are trapped or harmed in some way. So when we see a few bees buzzing from flower to flower, or from plant to plant there is no reason to become alarmed.

Africanized honey bees (AHB) also called Africanized bees or killer bees were first reported in Southern Arizona in 1993. They have currently spread over the entire lower elevations of the state, and even the upper elevations during the warmest part of the year. Africanized bees swarm much more frequently than the European honey bees based on the availability of food. Also, Africanized bees proliferate easier because they are less discriminating in their choice of nests than native bees, utilizing a variety of natural and man-made objects, including hollow trees, caves, crevasse in rocks, walls, porches, sheds, attics, utility boxes, garbage containers, abandoned vehicles, even old soda cans and overturned flower pots.

Africanized bees acquired the name killer bees because they are more aggressive and will viciously attack people and animals that unwittingly stray into their territory, often resulting in serious injury or death, due to a larger number of stings.

It is not necessary to disturb the hive itself to initiate an AHB attack. In fact, Africanized bees have been known to respond aggressively to loud noises or even vibrations from vehicles, equipment or people.

Though their venom is no more potent than native bees, Africanized bees attack in far greater numbers and pursue perceived enemies for greater distances. Once disturbed, colonies may remain agitated for 24 hours, attacking people and animals within a range of a quarter mile from their hive.

Africanized and European honey bees are similar in that they:

- Look the same (only an expert can distinguish between them)
- Sting in defense of themselves or their nest
- Can only sting once
- Have the same venom
- Pollinate
- Produce honey and wax

Africanized bees are different in that they will:

- Live just about anywhere
- Guard their hive aggressively and more rapidly
- Respond more quickly and with more bees stings
- Can sense a threat from people or animals 50 feet or more from their nest
- Senses vibrations from power equipment 100 feet or more from nest
- May pursue an enemy $\frac{1}{4}$ mile or more
- Nest in smaller cavities and sheltered areas
- Move their colony readily if food is scarce
- Are generally considered an invasive species
- Are not native to the U.S.; they came from Africa

The best safety advice is to be alert to your surroundings to avoid an encounter with unfriendly. When you are outdoors, in the garden, in your yard, park, or wilderness area, be aware of your surroundings and keep an eye out for bees the way you watch for snakes or other dangers. Be alert for bees that are acting strangely. Quite often bees will display some preliminary defensive behavior before going into full-fledged attack. They may fly at your face or buzz around your head. These warning signs should be heeded, since the bees are telling you that you have come into their area and are too close to their colony for both your and their comfort.

There are a few things you can do to be prepared.

- Wear light-colored clothing. Experience has shown that bees tend to be attracted to dark things.
- Avoid wearing floral or citrus aftershave or perfume when hiking. Bees are sensitive to odors.
- Check around your house and yard at least once a month to see if there are any signs of bees taking up residence. If you do find a colony, leave it alone, and keep your family and pets away. Call a pest control company or your local Department of Agricultural office.
- To help prevent honey bees from building a colony in your house or yard, fill all cracks and crevices in walls with steel wool and caulk. (bees can not eat thru steel wool, but they can eat thru caulk) Remove piles of junk, fill holes in the ground and cover the hole in your water meter box. Bees collect moisture for coolant for themselves and the hive.

If you are attacked

- RUN away as fast as possible.
- Do not try and retrieve belongings.
- Do not try to stand still in an attempt to fool bees. That does not fool bees
- Do not fight bees they have the advantage of numbers, and full sun light assists them. The more you flail your arms, the madder they get.
- Do NOT Jump Into Water. Bees will wait for you to come up for air.
- Use any covering for your body, especially your head and face, as this is where they are likely to attack first. Grab a coat, towel or anything that can cover your body. Stings to the head and face seem to be more severe. If you have nothing else, pull your shirt up over your face, but do not impair your vision.

- Find shelter as soon as possible. Take refuge in a house, tent or car with the windows and doors closed. Some bees are bound to enter with you, but it will be darker and probably cooler inside which confuse the bees. Even if you get stung a few times, remember a bee can only sting once.
- Remove stingers as soon as possible to lessen the amount of venom entering your body. Scrape stingers off the skin with a blunt instrument or plastic card. Do not remove bee stingers with fingers or tweezers – this only forces toxins into the body.
- Once you are away from the bees, evaluate the situation. If you have been stung more than 15 times, or if you are having any symptoms other than local pain and swelling, seek medical attention immediately.

Many of these safety measures could be difficult to apply under the excitement of an emergency situation if you are not mentally prepared. Most people taking part in normal outdoor activities do not have to go to any extraordinary lengths to be prepared, just keep in mind where you would go to escape bees and always be on the look out for danger.

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