

Today's topic is Orchard Mason Bees (*Osmia Lignaria Propinqua* Cresson). They're known to most of us as Mason Bees. If you have fruit trees or neighbors with fruit trees you'll want to know about these prolific pollinators.

Brian Griffin of Knox Cellars is one of the foremost experts on these tiny blueblack bees that look like flies but have four wings instead of the fly's two wings. His book is called "The Orchard Mason Bee." My copy of his book is from 1994. Be sure to buy his latest edition with even more information. Another great book by Brian is "Humblebee Bumblebee." You can find both books at most local nurseries and bookstores or visit Brian's web site [www.knoxcellars.com](http://www.knoxcellars.com).

Studies done by the Wytheville County Virginia Extension Office show three findings. Mason Bees have a pollination success rate of 95 plus percent compared to honey bees at a 3 percent pollination success rate. Mason Bees are the earliest pollinators emerging at 50 degrees which is also when apple blossoms accept pollination. Home and orchard gardeners need only 250 Mason Bees to pollinate an acre of fruit compared to 60,000 honeybees to do the same job in the same amount of time. This is an amazing feat.

To attract Mason Bees to your own garden you'll need only two things – mud and 5/16-inch holes. It's that easy. And, if you need an excuse to buy one more shrub for your garden, you can also plant a *Pieris Japonica* (*Andromeda japonica*) to provide additional nectar. If you already have a *Pieris* you've probably seen the Mason Bees congregating each year when it starts blooming in late February and early March. Brian Griffin has a *Pieris* planted ten feet away from his bee colony and says the bees feed on it all season.

Here are two easy ways to build your bees a home. Get 4x4 or 5x4 blocks of wood at least 7 inches long. You'll want to buy untreated fir, pine or hemlock wood. Be sure your wood is very dry otherwise it will split over time or when you drill it. Another home for your bees requires coffee cans, milk cartons, or empty soda bottles (with one end open) and cardboard tubes from dry cleaning hangers. The most critical factor is that the bees need 5/16-inch (or slightly larger) holes. Smaller holes yield more males than females. You want females which are the most important pollinators and also the baby makers. Each year the bees need clean holes to nest in so cardboard tubes work well for this. Knox Cellars now sells bamboo tubes which are quite successful and easy to clean.

Pick your block of wood and drill holes from front to back all over it stopping each time within ½ inch of the back of the block. You'll need a shingle for a roof to keep rain off the front of the block. If you cut your wood block on a slant and then mount the shingle on the slant it makes a clever house for your mason bee colony. Think of it as a solid birdhouse-like structure only full of abundant 5/16-inch holes for Mason Bees. The coffee can, milk carton, pop bottle method also makes a colony house for your bees. Fold the cardboard tubes in half and fill the containers with the open ends of the cardboard tubes facing out. You can cut the carton or plastic bottle so that it makes a roof over the tubes.

If you build it they will come. March is the month to put up Mason Bee houses. You'll hang your Mason Bee houses in your fruit trees or on the side of a building where it will ideally get morning sun. The bees will fill the holes up with nectar rich food, lay eggs and seal it all up with mud. Be sure there are flowers blooming in the area from February through June so your bees will have a ready pollen source. You'll leave the houses up until September. You can send a self-addressed stamped envelope to me in care of the North Kitsap Herald and I'll mail you directions for making Mason Bee houses. Next week I'll tell you about the life cycle of these fantastic pollinators.

In the meantime you'll want to check out some of the following classes available for free or very little. Master Gardener Don McDonald will give a class on pruning fruit trees, plants and hedges on Tuesday, February 29 from 7-9 PM at North Kitsap High School. The class is ten dollars. Call 779-9898 to register. Valley Nursery on Bond Road has a free fruit tree pruning seminar at 10 AM on February 26. Call 779-3806 to register. Also mark your calendars for the second Saturday of each month for free seminars given by our local treasure Ann Lovejoy at Bainbridge Gardens. Call Bainbridge Gardens at 206-842-5888 for details.