



Orchard Mason Bees

The Orchard Mason Bee is a great pollinator for the Pacific Northwest. This gentle native bee hatches around the same time as our fruit trees bloom. The Orchard Mason Bees work the blossoms in weather 5°F cooler than honeybees. Unlike honeybees, they will work in the rain.

Orchard Mason Bees make very good neighbors and are non-aggressive. They are so unobtrusive that you may already be in close proximity with this amazing garden helper and not even be aware of it. The Orchard Mason Bee is about the size of a housefly. It has a sting similar to a mosquito bite. However, it stings only if roughly handled or caught in clothing.

Increasing the population of Orchard Mason Bees in your garden is easy and fun. One way is to add particularly tasty flowering plants, such as Pieris, to your landscape. Plants that bloom very early each spring and provide the Orchard Mason Bee with a rich food source are desirable. Another way to encourage larger populations in your garden is to make nesting easier. Orchard Mason Bees require nesting holes and mud to caulk them up. They do not dig holes but lay their eggs in holes made by other insects or in spaces between wooden shingles, etc. You can buy a “bee condo” or “bee house” for them, or make a nesting block by drilling 5/16” holes $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through an **untreated** fir or hemlock 4”X4” block. Because mites and diseases can build up in “bee houses” used year after year, we recommend either using a house that can be disassembled and cleaned every fall, or putting out fresh nesting blocks every spring.

Hang your nesting block under an overhang if possible, close to the plants you want pollinated. While the bees can travel several hundred yards to search for food, they will normally pick the trees and shrubs that are the closest to pollinate first. Be sure that a mud source is conveniently located; if we have a dry spell, add water! Best results are usually obtained if you place your nesting blocks facing south or west, though facing east can be acceptable. Southern- and eastern-facing blocks will make bees become active earlier in the day, while blocks facing the west will typically see the bees becoming active later in the day.

In the early spring Sky carries live Orchard Mason Bees ready to hatch. These may come in cardboard tubes or in what looks like a film canister. You can put them out immediately to wake up on their own, but they will be vulnerable to predation once they are outside. Or, store them until you need them for pollination in a refrigerator between 35° and 45° F. If your refrigerator is frost-free, store them in a plastic container with a moist cloth to provide humidity, and check periodically for signs of mildew.

Put the bees out about two weeks before you expect to need them for pollination. If you buy a commercial bee house it may have a hole or place to insert your starter canister or tube. If you make your own or buy another style of house, you can duct-tape the canister or tube to the bottom of the bee house. When it is in place, take off the colored tape covering the hole to allow the bees to escape.

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Once the bees become active, the female lays eggs daily for 30-35 days, so within a year you may enjoy a 5-fold increase. The female lays an egg, deposits pollen from your plants as food for the larva, then uses mud to seal off the egg in its own compartment. One hole will usually have multiple compartments, each with its own egg. The eggs soon hatch and the larvae eat the pollen left by their mother, spin cocoons, and change to adults over the summer. A fully-developed adult will spend the long winter still inside its cocoon, emerging the following spring to repeat the cycle.

We recommend that you remove the bee cocoons in the fall for inspection and cleaning, and that you clean your bee houses. This prevents the build up of bee diseases and predators that could otherwise spread. See our mason bee fall care sheet for detailed instructions.

The cocoons can then be stored for the winter in a refrigerator to keep them safe from predators and/or to control their hatching time so they emerge when your plants are needing to be pollinated.

Keep your nesting blocks clean and your bees safe from predators, and have a fruitful season!

If you wish to learn more about this native pollinator, we recommend you read [Mason Bee Revolution](#) by Dave Hunter and Jill Lightner.

Timeframe	To Do
Early Spring	Place empty mason bee nesting blocks in good locations.
Spring 55°F	Release cocoons near nesting holes when blossoms are open and daytime temps are at least 55°F/13°C. If needed, place out moist clayey mud.
Spring 55°F	Wait and watch. Males emerge first. The larger females can take several days longer to emerge.
Spring	Females will gather pollen and nectar, lay eggs, seal egg chambers with clayey-mud. If needed, keep the mud source moist.
Late Spring/ Summer	If needed, protect nesting blocks from hot sun and from predators such as woodpeckers.
Early Fall	Recommended: harvest the cocoons, remove any diseased cocoons, clean others with a very mild bleach solution, and dry. Clean nesting blocks with mild bleach solution. See our fall care sheet for details.
Fall/Winter	Store cocoons in fridge. Watch humidity levels.