

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



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Common Wasps Seen in Lawn Areas
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Big and scary looking, but is managing them necessary? Identifying the large insects is the key. During the summer, Scolia wasps, cicada killers, and velvet ants are among the wasps in lawns. These insects carry out their daily chores and tend to ignore humans. Their bright warning coloration emphasizes their ability to sting, but they are not aggressive, and management efforts are rarely needed. However, learning more about these insects provides a better understanding of why they are in the lawn.

A troubling sight may be hundreds of blue-winged Scolia wasps buzzing lazily over expanses of turf. However, these beneficial insects are working hard to parasitize as many white grubs as possible. While packing a stinger, these solitary hunters pose no threat to us. They are following their own agenda, a tireless search for grubs of various insect species down in the soil feeding on grass roots.

This wasp has a black head, thorax, and wings. The front of the abdomen is black. The back is dark orange with two distinct yellow bars. Cruising females occasionally enter the soil in search of white grubs, which serve as food for the wasp larvae. They can be very abundant in turf where white grubs are numerous; however, the wasps are not aggressive, they are not

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defending a nest as would social wasps such as yellowjackets and hornets. There is no need for control.

Another wasp is the cicada killers, which fly about and burrow into lawns, gardens, and play areas. Despite their menacing appearance, the female wasps are not aggressive but will sting if attacked. Their size as an adult insect makes an impression since they are up to 2 inches long with rusty red head/thorax, amber-yellow wings, and black and yellow striped abdomen.

The cicada killers do not live in communal nests like hornets or yellowjackets. They overwinter as larvae within cocoons deep in the soil, emerging as adults during July. The females feed, mate, and excavate burrows in the ground about 2 inches in diameter, ending in a series of brood chambers. Bare ground or sand is especially prone to infestation. Excess soil is pushed out of the burrow, leaving a mound of dirt at the entrance.

Each female excavates numerous burrows and supplies them with adult cicadas which she ambushes, paralyzes with her venom, and stuffs into individual brood chambers. She then lays an egg on top, backs out, and seals the cell behind her. The egg hatches within a few days, and the hungry larva devours the cicada, eventually transforming into an adult the following summer.

Cicada killers seldom sting, and the females normally do not defend their burrows. The males, which do not have a stinger, sometimes dive-bomb passers-by or hover nearby.

Insecticide treatment may be warranted where the soil burrows become unsightly, or the wasps are digging in a high-traffic area, such as along a sidewalk or playground. Individual burrows can be effectively sprayed or dusted with most lawn and garden insecticides or a wasp and hornet aerosol.

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If the cicada killers burrow at the base of a plant, drenching the area around the base of affected plants with water is the best approach. The wasps do not like wet soil. By watering the plants thoroughly, the soil settles back around the roots, giving the plant a chance to survive and hopefully forcing the wasp to abandon the site. The application of an insecticide to this area is not recommended since it may damage the roots of the plant and/or result in a pesticide residue in the plant.

As a deterrent to future nesting, eliminate bare-ground areas. Cicada killers generally do not prefer burrowing into well-managed turf, gravel, pebbles, or mulch. Consider substituting these for sand or bare soil in playgrounds, camping areas, or commercial landscapes. Another option is to wait and do nothing. In a matter of weeks, the adults will die off, and there is a chance the problem will not recur next year.

Velvet ants are striking, large insects clothed in red and black or orange and black "hairs." This insect is actually a wasp. They differ from ants in having only a slight constriction between the thorax and abdomen and having straight rather than elbowed antennae. They may be seen in lawns or pastures or occasionally wandering into buildings. They are solitary and do not have an identifiable nest since they feed on nectar, water, and immature stages of bees and wasps that nest in the ground. There is no place to treat with an insecticide.

The males have two pairs of transparent black wings. The females are wingless and ant-like. The females have very long stingers concealed at the tip of their abdomen. The potency of the punch they pack is referred to in one of their common names - "cow killer wasps." They pose no threat unless handled or stepped on by bare feet.

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For more information about Scolia wasps, cicada killers, and velvet ants contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

Annette's Tip:

Daylilies do not need to be fertilized in the fall. One spring application of a slow-release fertilizer is usually enough and possibly not necessary every year. Apply a slow-release fertilizer after the plants are cleaned up in the spring. Test the soil in the bed through the Cooperative Extension Service to make sure phosphorus and potassium levels are adequate, especially in new flower beds.

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