

This column features questions from readers submitted via the website. To submit a question to Small Acre Sam, visit BarnyardsandBackyards.com. If your question is featured, you will receive a free one-year subscription to *Barnyards & Backyards!*



ask Sam

question

Dear Sam,

If I plant pollinator plants, will they attract hoards of wasps or similar stinging insects (like yellowjackets)?

– Jane, Sheridan

answer

Dear Jane,

Many of the insects attracted to flowers mimic the warning coloration of wasps and bees even if they are incapable of stinging. Flower flies (Order Diptera: Family Syrphidae) are an example. This may give the false impression of there being a swarm of yellowjackets feeding on the flowers.



*A harmless coloration mimic of wasps, the common oblique syrphid, *Allograpta obliqua*.*

The western yellowjacket and the European paper wasp are the insect species most likely to sting people. (They have been implicated in the majority of stings in the western U.S.) Stings usually occur when people unknowingly approach their nests. Accidentally disturbing a western yellowjacket colony is easy to do because they like to nest in inconspicuous spots underground, under porches, and in crawlspaces. These two stinging wasp species are not interested in pollen and don't have the proper mouthparts to efficiently feed on nectar, so they are not especially attracted to flowers.

Most insect pollinators, such as bumble bees, pollen wasps, and leafcutter bees, for example, that are capable of stinging and do like to feed on nectar and pollen, are reluctant to sting. Generally, they only sting if physically assaulted. So don't try to grab them!

An example of pollinating insects' reluctance to sting can be seen in a pasture covered with flowering clover or dandelions being grazed by livestock. The cattle, sheep, or horses graze peacefully with their faces in the middle of all that insect pollination activity without being stung. Most of the time when you see livestock being panicked by insects they are attacked by insects such as bot flies or the northern cattle grub, or if they have accidentally disturbed a wasp or hornet nest.

– Sam