

There's little to fear from fearsome-looking cicada killer wasps, says entomologist

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In spite of its fearsome appearance, there is little to fear from the cicada killer wasp, said Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service entomologist Wizzie Brown. Credit: Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service photo by Wizzie Brown

The expression that things are bigger in Texas certainly applies to one of its scarier-looking summer insects—the cicada killer wasp, said a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service entomologist in Austin.

"I've been getting lots of calls lately from people worried about large and conspicuous wasps appearing in their yards and gardens," said Wizzie Brown, AgriLife Extension integrated pest management specialist for Travis County. "These are cicada killer wasps and can be a frightening sight, but while they look fearsome there's not a lot to fear from them."

Brown said cicada killers grow to about 1½ inches long. They have a reddish-brown head and thorax, and an abdomen with alternative black with yellow markings. Their wings have a rusty tinge.

The female cicada killer digs a burrow in home lawns or sandy, well-drained soil that's exposed to full sun. She paralyzes cicadas with her sting, drags them into her burrow and lays eggs on them. After hatching from the egg, her larvae then eat the remains of the cicada.

Although female cicada killers can sting, they usually ignore people and are rarely aggressive, Brown said. And while the male is often territorial and may act aggressively, he doesn't have a stinger.

"So except for the scare factor, the males are pretty harmless," Brown said. "You could say that their buzz is a lot worse than their bite."

Brown said while wasp activity can become a nuisance and the size and aggressiveness of males defending their territory can be disconcerting, the cicada killer is actually a beneficial insect. They help reduce cicada populations and can also help pollinate plants.

"As cicada killers are relatively harmless, there's no real need for pest control," she said. "However, if you just don't like having these wasp

burrows in your yard or having large wasps flying around your home, you can apply insecticidal dust to the entrance of the cicada killer burrow," she said.

She added that controlling cicadas in theory might have an effect on reducing cicada killer populations, but "there's not much you can do to control adult cicadas except to wait them out."

Provided by Texas A&M University

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