

“I’ve found a bumblebee nest!”

Every year we receive lots of enquiries relating to bumblebee nests so we have prepared this list of frequently asked questions to help answer our most common nest enquiries. We have also created this guide to bumblebee nests and what you need to know to help people understand what to do if they find a nest.

How can I help a bumblebee nest?

You can help a bumblebee colony which is nesting near you by providing plenty of bee-friendly flowers for them throughout their lifecycle (generally from August to May).

I’ve damaged a bumblebee nest on the ground, what can I do?

Depending on the level of damage, the bumblebees will aim to repair parts of the nest that were damaged. It is best to leave the area alone and see if the bumblebees can repair it. If necessary, place an upturned flower pot over the nest to give them some shelter.

How long do bumblebee nests live for?

Normally nests live for about 2 or 3 months. After this time the original queen, her workers and her sons will die. If the nest has been successful in rearing new queens they will leave the nest to mate and then go on to hibernate somewhere in the soil – ready to emerge the following spring to start their own colonies.

Will the bees damage my house?

Bumblebees do not cause structural damage (i.e. they do not chew through wood or bore holes). They utilise material which is already available to make their nests. Bumblebees don’t make or store honey either – so you won’t have any honey oozing through your ceiling or walls.

There are lots of bees swarming outside the nest, what should I do?

Bumblebees do not swarm.

If you see a swarm of honeybees you will need to contact your local beekeeping association swarm collector. Honeybee swarms contain hundreds (sometimes thousands) of honeybees which will usually be huddled together on a tree or some other surface.

I have a nest in my garden and I’m worried about my pets or children?

Bumblebees are not aggressive insects and are generally only interested in finding flowers. The only time when they may act defensively is if something disturbs their nest so it can be a good idea to put some sort of barrier in place a few metres from where they are nesting so that any pets or young children do not disturb the nest. Having a bumblebee nest in your garden can provide a great opportunity to teach children about these vitally important pollinators.

Can someone move the nest for me?

Please note: we do not move bumblebee nests. Generally we do not advise that people move nests unless it is absolutely necessary. Most bumblebee colonies do not survive after being relocated so it is always better to let them finish their short life-cycles rather than move their nest. If the entrance to a nest is in an awkward place – such as next to a door, you can attempt to re-route the exit.

How far should a nest be moved?

Generally we would advise moving a nest either a few feet or somewhere which is noticeably different so that the bees will re-orientate themselves as they leave the nest following the move. Bumblebees generally forage no more than 1km from the nest so moving them over 1km away will also have the same effect. One thing which can be useful if only moving the bees a short distance is an obvious landmark. For example positioning a large plant in a pot outside the nest for a few days prior to moving and then moving the plant pot to the new nesting site prior to their release.

I have bumblebees nesting in my cavity wall somewhere, what should I do?

Nests in cavity walls are extremely difficult to locate, so it is best to allow them to finish their life which will only last for a couple of months. In the autumn after you stop noticing bees coming and going from the entrance, you can close up any holes which they were using. It's important not to do this while the nest is still alive as the bees will become trapped or end up using a different exit which might lead to them coming inside the house. If the bees were using an air-vent it is important not to block this up, you can position some mesh over the vent after the nest has died to prevent future queens from starting their colonies in the same place.

What to do if you find a bumblebee nest

If you find a bumblebee nest, consider yourself very lucky! They aren't very common, and can be difficult to find.

We recommend that if you find a bumblebee nest, it is best to leave it alone and avoid disturbing it. If you do approach close to it, be sure not to breathe on the nest, as this can make the bees behave defensively, and they may sting. Please note that though bumblebees are not generally aggressive, they might get aggravated if you interfere with the nest itself. They should just get on with life and do their own thing – doing a wonderful job of pollinating plants, wildflowers and your vegetables. Even the very largest nests produce very little 'traffic' in and out, so you won't see threatening numbers of bumblebees at any point during the summer.

If the bumblebees are living under your shed, and are coming up through holes in the floor, then this is probably because it's the easiest way in and out for them. If you make a different hole, from the outside of the shed, and then block up the hole they were using, then they should happily take to their new route.

Bumblebee nests don't live for long, so the nest should die naturally within a few months. After that time, the new queens will have flown from the nest to hibernate in the soil elsewhere.

It is possible that a different bumblebee queen will find and use the same hole next year. The old nest will die in the autumn though, and all the bumblebees will have left or died. If you don't want bumblebees in the same place again, you can block the entrance to the nest after it dies down to prevent a new queen finding the nest site in later years.

Moving bumblebee nests

We very much hope that people will only try to move nests that are in a particularly inconvenient locations. Underground nests will be difficult to move, as you'll create a considerable amount of disturbance as you dig down to the nest. These nests can also have long tunnels that lead to the nest, so can be difficult to find.

Staff from the Bumblebee Conservation Trust do not move bumblebee nests. If you do need to move a nest you will either need to do this yourself or get help from someone experienced in doing so. Please note, female bumblebees can sting and are more likely to do so if their nest is disturbed. If you decide to move a nest, it is done at your own risk. Some honeybee keepers may have some experience in moving bumblebee nests. You may also be able to find a commercial organisation that specialise in moving nests.

To move a nest safely it is best to do it in the dark – when all of the bees will be in the nest and docile. They might buzz a bit but they won't fly in the dark, so it's safest to do it then. They don't see red light well, so if you need to see what you're doing, put some red plastic film/acetate over a torch or use a red L.E.D. rear cycle light.

Bumblebees are less likely to sting than honeybees and wasps are. However, disturbing the nest can make them behave defensively, and precautions should be taken to prevent stings occurring. While a full bee-keepers' suit is helpful, it is not necessary. As a minimum, a person moving a nest should wear full length rubber 'washing up' gloves, and a long-sleeved top, and cover any exposed skin as best they can.