

OVERWINTERING WASPS

We are entering the time of the year when residents may contact Facilities with concern or panic in their voice referencing wasp invasions in buildings and demanding immediate control efforts and become frustrated when Facilities cannot immediately eliminate their problem.

What is happening and what can we do?

Overwintering

This is how insects pass the winter season. When the temperatures begin to cool, many insects look for a protected place to spend the winter season, usually from October through March. Protected areas can include places such as under bark, in mulch, under leaf piles or inside of buildings. Insects can overwinter in various life stages but many, such as wasps, pass the winter season as adults. They can congregate in very large numbers.

General Information

The overwintering wasps we normally encounter in commercial structures are usually paper wasps or yellowjackets. These individuals (queens) are the last generation produced by their respective nests. The previous or “old” generation of wasps die as winter approaches and the nest is abandoned and will not be reused. This last group of wasps produced by the colony are the ones that enter structures to spend the winter and then emerge in the spring to start new colonies or nests.

No one really knows for certain why they enter a particular structure. Possible reasons may include the heat given off from a building, sunlight striking in a particular manner, odors produced by previous overwintering activity or that there was simply a heavy population in the surrounding area. The wasps use spaces and gaps in the exterior of the building to enter - **they don't fly in the front door!** Many times there was no wasp activity or nests observed during the warmer months on the structure.

Remember, the wasps are not nesting but looking for a protected place to spend the winter. They may gather together or cluster in the walls or ceilings of a building. The customer discovers a problem when the heat is turned on inside the building or on a warm winter day when the wasps become active and accidentally find their way into the occupied work space. The process completes itself when spring time comes and the wasps leave the structure. But in the meantime, as warm days occur, the wasps expose themselves.

The good news is that the wasps are generally sluggish and the threat of being stung, while possible, is minimal. They tend to collect around the light at windows and if left alone will eventually die. The bad news is that sometimes they may be numerous in a small area and will periodically become active as temperatures warm up during the winter months. This regular activity is certainly annoying and of concern to residents.

Control

Unfortunately control options are limited. However, Facilities, in conjunction with the exterminator, are taking all possible steps to mitigate the issue. They ask for patience as the wasps will die in occupied spaces and pose a limited risk but also warn that the wasps are likely to continue throughout the winter.