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COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: The culprits attacking the bark on your trees could be European hornets

Campbell Vaughn Columnist

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A group of retired and current extension agents and I play host to a radio call-in program on Saturday mornings called the Wallace and Son Lawn and Garden show. We field questions about your lawn and garden.

We “experts” are always hoping we can make it through the whole show without getting stumped with a question for which we don’t know the answer. And boy did I get stumped the other day when a fellow called in about something attacking the bark of his dogwood tree.

Usually with that type of issue, woodpeckers are the easy scapegoat, but this time the description was not leaning toward Woody and his friends. I asked the caller to email me a picture and not only did I get stumped on the radio, I got stumped with the photograph. After sending the picture out to one of our UGA entomologists, our identification specialist concluded it was a European hornet and what those flying sting machines did to that dogwood was incredible.

The European or giant hornet is an introduced species first reported in the United States in 1840 in New York. Currently, its geographical range extends from the Northeast west to the Dakotas and south to Louisiana and Florida.

This hornet is a large 1.5-inch long brown and orange insect with dark wings. They build gray papery nests typically located in cavities like hollow trees or wall voids. Unlike their cousins, the bald-faced hornet, European hornets’ nests will rarely appear freely suspended like the football-shaped nests we sometimes see in the trees. The entrances to European hornets’ nests are frequently 6 feet or more above ground and occasionally the nest will extend outside the cavity or void.

Campbell Vaughn: Check out these hearty plants for your lawns; and beware pine straw scams

What my poor caller saw was the hornets gathering their material for building their nests and obtaining nutrients by chewing the branches and twigs to collect bark for nest building and feeding on the plant's sap.

These hornets are not very aggressive when away from home but will sting when threatened. The hornets will work together to defend their nest against anyone who comes too close. The pain is about the same as any wasp sting, but hornets can sting repeatedly.

The life cycle of the European hornet is like that of paper wasps and yellow jackets. Each spring, queens come out of hiding and search for nesting sites. This typically happens in the middle of spring. The queen begins constructing the paper nest from chewed wood and saliva. She will lay eggs in the first cells of the nest. The larvae mature, pupate in their cells, and then emerge as sterile female workers. These workers take over the responsibilities of foraging for food to feed the young larvae, collecting cellulose to expand the nest, and protecting the nest from external threats.

Typical foods for the young include crickets, grasshoppers, large flies, caterpillars and the workers of other yellowjacket species. About mid-July, some males and fertile females will be produced. By this time, the nest typically houses 200-400 residents. Mated females will overwinter and resume the cycle the following spring. The nest will not survive the winter, so if the hornet's home does not pose a danger, it is best to leave it alone and die out naturally.

Unlike most stinging insects, European hornets fly at night and are attracted to light, so there are times you can find them banging on your windows in the late evening.