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Keeping pests away

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There's nothing like a garden party: the sun is shining, the food's divine, guests are laughing and kids are playing. A picture-perfect day, until someone swats the air.

An occasional swipe becomes a gyrating frenzy and the party moves indoors: Bees and wasps can put a damper on backyard parties and make your summer intolerable.

"We get a lot of early calls for hives that survived the winter," said Frank Pulcini of Central Extermination. "If you see a few bugs, it's not a concern. But if you note a lot of activity, there is a hive that survived and must be dealt with."

Bees and wasps will stay as long as it is comfortable, Pulcini said. "That means keeping food sources and vegetation as far away from your home as possible. Keep flowers 30 feet away from your building."

There are commercial and homemade traps to reduce populations of bees and wasps. Sprays can be effective outdoors for suspended nests, but not for covered nests because dug-in hives will dig in deeper when attacked, he said. "Powder at entrances is better because they bring it into the hive with them."

Wasp nests - grey sacks made of paper-like material - hanging from trees or structures should be removed. If a nest is there in early spring and a nudge goes unanswered, it probably can be removed easily. But "if you suspect part of it is recessed in a building or tree where it's warm, call a professional," Pulcini said.

While a swat or a simple visit from an exterminator can deal with flying pests, bigger nuisances like skunks and raccoons can turn your summer field of dreams into a nightmare.

Nocturnal creatures are hard to pinpoint, but there are clues. If your lawn is ravaged and covered with feces, the trouble goes beyond rattled garbage cans. Just the feces of raccoons is troublesome, said Bill Dowd, president and founder of Humane Wildlife Control.

"They contain millions of eggs of microscopic roundworm," he explained. "If this gets in your kids' sandbox or in your home on shoes or garden tools, it can cause horrible infections that seriously harm people."

Attics infiltrated by raccoons are littered with contaminated feces that require specialized removal and disposal. It's a lot easier to just cap a chimney, replace siding or use other prevention methods.

"These animals flourish because of humans," Dowd said. Improper composting and setting out recycle bins and garbage early are big factors; come Sunday night, your entire street can be one long smorgasbord for night feeders.

Those whimsical little bird feeders? Very attractive to squirrels and cats. Backyard fish

ponds? A boon to raccoons used to creeks and streams. "You've given them a nice food and water supply," Dowd said. "Easier than searching blue bins for leftover Chef Boyardee."

Apart from household food supplies, your lawn can be inviting them, too.

"Raccoons and skunks will dig it up looking for grubs (beetle larvae)." The grubs also attract other animals, like blackbirds.

Dowd said all areas of Montreal have become havens for pests; skunks, raccoons and foxes nest under sheds, balconies, shrubs, in window wells, woodpiles and hollow trees.

"Remove opportunities for nesting spots," he said, "and cover window wells. Any structure without a foundation is suspect."

If they take up residence under your shed, in your attic or chimney, call a professional.

Birthing season is mid-March to July. "An animal won't be coaxed out if it has babies inside." If outside, a mother will do everything to get back in and if you block a hole improperly, it will just dig a few feet over. If you seal off a site containing baby skunks, they will die and really stink up your property.

You can easily detect movement at a site by sprinkling flour, sand or baby powder at an entrance to show tracks, or place crumpled newspapers in the hole and watch for movement. If there is none for a full week, then assume the den is empty and close it.

Once an animal cannot get back in, Dowd said, it will go to other neighbourhood sites. "They have options and will move on."

You can consider deterrents like cayenne pepper, mothballs and commercial repellents, but mechanical approaches are better. Animal-proofing a shed means digging a perimeter trench and inserting metal screening. Motion-detector sprinklers on garden hoses also work, providing unsettling noises and water sprays. Small, very low-voltage, electric fences can also deliver small pulses to deter most animals.

These pests are here to stay but you can get them to vacate your property, Dowd said. "They are smart and do not like the hassle. They remember which areas gave them trouble.

"Trapping and relocating is not the answer," he insisted, "and 70 per cent of these animals don't survive in new surroundings. Others will simply move in.

"Make your property unattractive to them. That's the only way."

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A few tips for pest control

Put your garbage out in the morning (not the night before). Use trash cans with tight-fitting lids; use bungee cords to secure them. Soak the bungee cords in a mixture of water and cayenne pepper.

Double-wrap strong smelling garbage or place mothballs in the area to mask odours. Pepper, mothballs, commercial dog and cat repellents, and ammonia-soaked rags can all help repel raccoons and skunks.

To control bees and wasps, be vigilant about removing fruit that has fallen off trees.

Keep flower beds away from buildings. Avoid wearing bright clothes, perfume, scented hairsprays, deodorants and using scented candles that may draw bees and wasps your way.

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