



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Wasp Emergency (June 28, 2025)

By Lesley McKnight, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

It was a beautiful, warm day, and I was working on my tomatoes. I realized they had been exposed to too much sunshine and decided to drag an unused umbrella over to shade them. As I bent in to crank it open, I heard buzzing, felt movement, and then an intense pain at my lip. I backed away quickly and realized there were wasps coming out of the umbrella. My first thought was: what do I do?

I quickly googled what to do for a wasp sting and found advice--University of California's IPM Publication 7449 on Bee and Wasp Stings (<https://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7449.html>). It said to immediately remove the stinger, if possible, scraping it away. If the stinger is removed within 15 seconds, the severity is reduced. Unfortunately, I didn't make that 15-second rule. The next steps are to clean the area with soap and water, and then apply a cold compress for 10 to 15 minutes, repeatedly if needed. It advised that I could take an over-the-counter antihistamine or pain reliever. It also advised that if I experienced a severe reaction or if the sting occurred on the neck or mouth, I should seek medical attention immediately. While my sting was just below my lip, and the pain was pretty intense, requiring ice off and on for a couple of hours--the good news is: I did survive! This experience made me decide to learn more about wasps!

Types of Wasps

According to the University of California publication 7450

(<https://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7450.html>), in California, there are two main kinds of social wasps: paper wasps and yellowjackets, with yellowjackets being the more troublesome in human interactions.

Yellowjackets

The term Yellowjackets refers to a number of different species found in California. Some of these are ground-nesting species, such as the western yellowjacket, *Vespula pensylvanica*, sometimes called the "meat bee," and seven other species of *Vespula*. Other species nest in rotted tree stumps at higher elevations or around houses in urban areas (such as abandoned umbrella stands). Yellowjackets are generally black with jagged bands of bright yellow on the abdomen and have a very short, narrow "waist," the area where the thorax attaches to the abdomen.



Yellowjackets can be extremely aggressive and defend their nests vigorously when disturbed. Their nests generally have one entrance. The exterior of their nest has a paper envelope that covers the interior cells. The nest resembles an upside-down umbrella with one entry point. Some species of yellowjackets can bite and sting simultaneously. Wasp stingers have no barbs and can be used repeatedly. It is best to leave the area as quickly as possible if wasps start stinging.

Paper Wasps

The other wasp, a paper wasp, is generally unaggressive but can be a problem around human activity.

According to the UC IPM PestNote, they are 1-inch-long slender wasps with long legs. Most Western species tend to be golden brown or darker with large patches of yellow or red. They prefer to live in or near orchards or vineyards, but also will nest around houses in protected areas, such as under eaves. Their paper nest hangs more from a pedicel (stalk) with open cells that can be seen from beneath.

The Sting of Wasps

I did not see my attacker; it was too swift, and I left the area too quickly. I was not going back near enough to identify the nest! UCANR has a helpful video, "Distinguishing between yellowjackets, wasps, and look-alikes", here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJHKA-Fre0k>

As I sat with my ice pack, feeling like a big baby, I read that Justin O Schmidt, an entomologist, systematized and compared the effects of insect venoms. His work culminated in a book published in 2016 called The Sting of the Wild, which rates the sting pain of 78 species of bees, wasps, and ants with an often somewhat humorous descriptor. The scale goes from 0 to 4. Yellow jackets are awarded a pain level of 2 with the descriptor of the sting being "hot and smoky, almost irreverent. Imagine W.C. Fields extinguishing a cigar on your tongue." A paper wasp is awarded a pain level of 3, and described as "caustic and burning with a distinctly bitter aftertaste." I admit reading about the pain index brought some needed humor to my situation.

Wasps are not our enemies.

So, what was I to do now? I understand that wasps provide a service in our gardens by eliminating large amounts of plant-feeding insects and nuisance flies. They can also be important pollinators. According to Professor Amy Toth of Iowa State University, they can be useful in ways we wouldn't suspect: "They have been shown to carry yeasts to winemaking grapes that may be important contributors to the fermentation process and wonderful flavors in wine!"

If we can coexist safely in the garden, that is the ideal. Wasps only become a problem when they sting or threaten humans. Since I was stung and the nest was a little too close to my tomato plants, I felt more drastic measures were warranted. If a nest must be removed, it is best to call a professional. You can contact the Mosquito Vector and Control Association of California at 916-440-0826 to see if this service is available in your area.

I personally called my local pest control company, and it turned out there were two nests in my umbrella. My technician explained the wasps were very groggy in the early morning hours and weren't flying. Indeed, I witnessed some crawling on the ground. I could see from looking at the nests that these were indeed paper wasps. I will admit that after reading about Justin Schmidt's pain scale, I felt a little justified to find I had been stung by a pain level 3 paper wasp, and not a level 2 yellow jacket. Maybe I wasn't just a big baby after all!

Are you interested in becoming a Master Gardener? Our next class will begin in January 2026 and run through May 2026, with weekly classes. For more information, visit: <https://ucanr.edu/site/tulare-kings-master-gardeners/become-master-gardener>.

If interested, please fill out a survey: <https://surveys.ucanr.edu/survey.cfm?surveynumber=10225>.

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Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

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