Urban Beekeeping

When Darci Shaver sees a mason bee flying near her Portland home, she pretty much waves it onto her property. That's because Shaver, an expert in holistic business development, her husband, Matt Morasky, a graphic designer, and their son, Owen, 9, make bees a part of their lives. *Oregon Home's Green Living* asked Shaver about the reality of inviting bees to take up residence on your porch.

How did you become buzzed about having your own mason bees? "Three years ago, I read an article about them and learned that there's a huge problem with bee colony collapse, which affects pollination. Mason bees are an easy way to help increase pollination, so we bought a mason bee house. The bees live one per hole, similar to how they live in reeds in the wild."

Are mason bees high-maintenance? "No; they hardly need anything. The bees do better when they're on the east side of the house and they like for the eaves to cover their house. That way, they get sun yet are protected. They're dormant in the winter, then emerge in the spring. Since we started keeping bees, we've moved and we just brought the bee house with us. It's so easy to have mason bees that Matt says he doesn't always remember that we're keeping them on the porch!"

Do mason bees have stingers? "You don't need protective clothing! They aren't aggressive. When we started, I felt a little trepidation because at the time we had some vicious ground-dwelling bees in our yard, so our experience with bees hadn't been positive. Now Owen and his friends will play near the bee house and not think twice. Or as Owen says, 'Bees are more afraid of *you* than you are of *them*!'"

Why are mason bees such good pollinators? "Mason bees put pollen in stiff hairs on their bodies. The hairs don't hold the pollen well, so some of it is always spills off as they continue to collect more of it. It is their inefficient pollen-collection system that makes them great pollinators."

Do the bees change the way you interact with your yard? "I notice the plants the bees like a lot more. I have euphorbia, and the mason bees *love* it. The bees fly straight from their house to the plant. I'm putting in a lot of native and drought-tolerant plants, which make for a good bee environment."

Have mason bees gotten you interested in other kinds of bees? "Yes; we participate in The Great Sunflower Project (go to greatsunflowerproject.org) each year. You plant sunflowers, and on a designated day, you count how many bees visit to help keep track of honeybee populations. It's a great project for kids. Last year, we saw seven bees, which was alarming. Owen thinks honeybees should be an endangered species."

What are some other benefits to cultivating mason bees? "As a family, we're always trying to get back to a more natural order of things. We eat organic. I have a garden and preserve a lot of food. We drink raw milk and make yogurt. It's important to show kids the wonders of nature, and to find ways to restore nature since we use it so much. Even something as simple as keeping mason bees helps nature stay in balance."

—*Margaret Foley*

FREE TO BE: Rustic cedar homes for mason bees to colonize start at $15, Backyard Bird Shop (1419 N.E. Fremont, 503-445-2699) in Portland.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY REBECCA MACK