

A Bee Hotel

You may be asking yourself what is a Bee Hotel? Simply put, it is a man made object that offers Solitary bees a home in which they can rest and breed in safety.

According to scientist there are nearly 3000 bee species in sub-Saharan Africa, of which about a third occur in South Africa.

Around the world bee abundance and diversity is dwindling, hence the need for us to lend a helping hand. Almost all bees as a result of their need to collect pollen to feed their young , become important pollinators. Only a few species of bees in South Africa make honey, they are the well known honey bees and the mopani bees (10 species), both these honey makers and the non honey making (Solitary Bees) are without doubt the most important crop and flower pollinators in the country.

It is a well known fact that pollination is essential for fruit, vegetable and seed development, without this process the agricultural industry would collapse and the human race worldwide would starve to death. Pollination is a complex and intricate subject. Different crops and flowers need specialised pollinators and to further complicate this matter, bee types and their populations differ from season to season and area to area.

The majority of bees in the country are solitary bees, some examples are: the leafcutter bees, carpenter bees (often mistakenly called the bumble bee), *Allodapula* (no common name) and cellophane bees. They are called solitary only because the females construct and inhabit the nest alone. Honey and wax are not produced by the solitary bees. They range in colour, from basic black to bright metallic green, blue or red.

The young feed on both the pollen that is collected and stored in the nest as well as a paste like mixture of pollen and nectar. Some solitary bees have advanced types of pollen-carrying structures on their bodies; unlike the honey bee where the pollen is collected in baskets on the legs some solitary bees will collect it in hair structures under their abdomen.

Solitary bees usually create nests in hollow reeds, twigs or holes in wood. The hotel provides these desperately needed nesting hollows for them. The Leaf cutters create compartments inside the nest and usually a single egg is laid in each of the compartments. Once the nest is full, the bee will seal the nest opening using leaves. Different bees use different materials (mud, saliva, leaves etc) and alternative techniques. In the case of the leaf cutter ,the eggs closest to the sealed entrance hatch first and are usually the males. The females hatch later and partner up quickly with earlier hatched males that have remained in the area waiting for this opportunity.

The adults bees do not look after the eggs once laid. Their life span is short, usually dying after making one or more nests. Solitary bees are either stingless or very unlikely to sting (only in self-defence, if ever). Making them safe around children and pets.

To really enjoy the hotels and all of the activity, hang them at eye level or lower if the children would like to get involved. Find a dry spot that is in dappled sunlight, a bright shaded area or in an area that only receives early morning sunlight (not direct sunlight as that will be too hot). Ideally place it on a wall around the house, in the boma or under the cover of the veranda facing the garden. Hang it where you can see it and enjoy it. Take pride in knowing that you are making a valuable contribution to the protection and conservation of our bees in the country.

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