

# Oxleas Wood APIARY

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## MORTAR OR MASONRY BEES

Mortar or Masonry (*Osmia*) bees are slightly smaller than honey bees but similar in appearance. Like all bees they are important pollinators of plants, but unlike honey bees and bumble bees *Osmia* are solitary having no workers and no collective nest. Mortar bees excavate chambers in soft mortar joints in brick walls (approximately 20mm deep) and mining bees will excavate chambers in soft/sandy soil. Although they are solitary they do excavate their chambers close together and thus give the impression of being a colony and occupying the same habitat.

The males and females are active from late April - mid June. On warm sunny days during this period they are busy constructing their chambers in mortar joints or soft/sandy soil. Despite popular belief mortar/masonry bees do not damage brickwork and mortar, and only take advantage of existing decay. They invariably choose areas that get a lot of sun and are frequently seen on south facing elevations of buildings.



The female lays eggs in separate chambers, which are stocked with pollen and nectar and then sealed with a mud wall. The eggs hatch out as a larvae feeding on the pollen and nectar left in the chamber. The larvae then pupate and subsequently hatch out as full adults emerging from the chambers in the reverse order of laying about a year later.

The male *Osmia* bees are first to hatch and emerge, for about a week or two they remain within a short distance of the chambers to mate with emerging females following which the male dies and the fertilised female goes about building, provisioning and laying eggs in the individual chambers. The adult females bees only live for a short period of time approximately April - June and both parent bees will therefore have died before the offspring emerges about a year later.

Common to south and midlands UK is the Red Mason Bee (*Osmia rufa*). The males of *O rufa* are smaller than the females and easily identified by a dense tuft of light coloured hair at the front of the head. Once the first nest has been completed the female will move on, always in the immediate locality to build other nests thus giving the locality the sense of a colony of *Osmia* bees when the different nest hatch during the following year.

*Osmia rufa* can be encouraged to artificial nests providing the nest has sufficient cavities of the appropriate dimensions – ideally about 6 to 8mm diameter and at least 20mm depth. The nest entrance should be south facing and located near a source of chamber construction and sealing material mud – the nearness of the mud source is particularly important because the further away the source of mud then the greater the likelihood that the unprotected egg will be parasitized by a wasp before the female *O rufa* is able to seal the chamber with its final mud wall.