

Gardening Basics

Asian Giant Hornets or Cicada Killers?

Most species of hornets are active here in North Texas during the spring and summer seasons attracted to the sweet nectar on our blooming plants. News media reported that a new Asian hornet species had been discovered in the United States a few years ago, the **Asian Giant Hornet (now known as Northern Giant Hornet)** (*Vespa mandarinia*), but it is highly unlikely they exist in Texas. They were sensationally called ‘murder hornets.’ Most likely, what is spotted in North Texas is the look-alike **Cicada killer wasp** (*Sphecius spp*) which is commonly seen here in the summer.

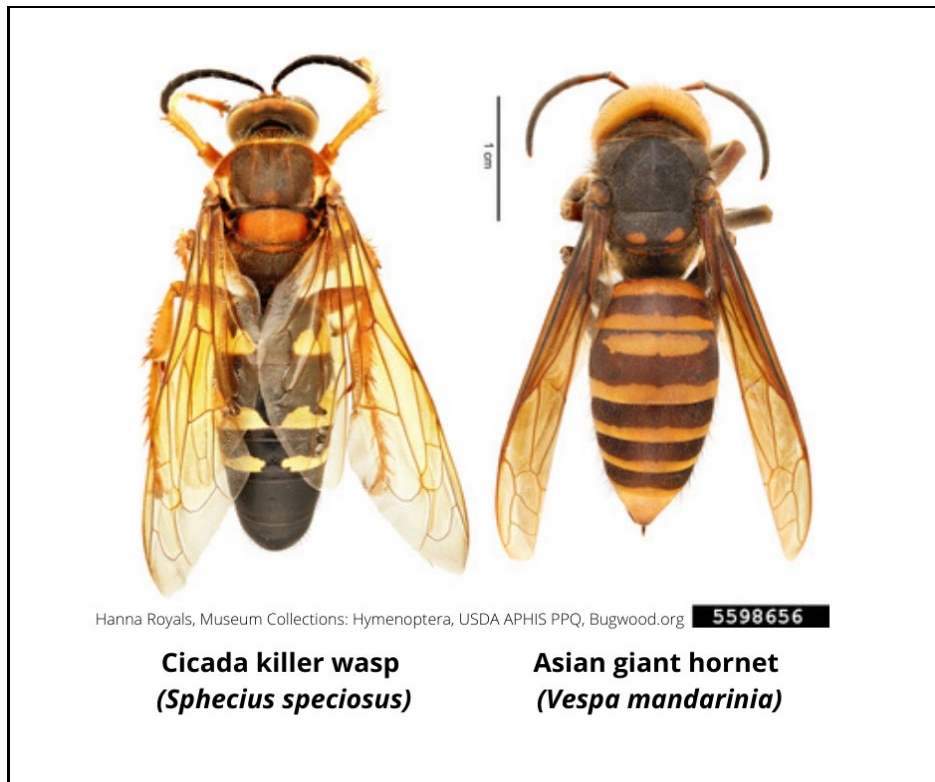
Updated facts about sightings

- There were 31 sightings of AGH/Northern Giant Hornets in 2020 and only in Washington State. In October 2020, the first nest eradication took place in Washington State.
- According to Texas A&M Apiary Inspection Service (Texas A&M AgriLife Research) “Currently, the AGH does not exist in Texas; however, it is important for beekeepers and the public to be aware of this pest and be able to identify it.”
- Mike Merchant, retired Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service entomologist on May 5, 2020, reported: “The bottom line is that the chance of Asian giant hornets invading Texas soon is slim, given that at the moment only a few wasps have been found in only one county in the far northwest corner of the U.S. Also, hornets are less likely to be transported by humans than many other exotic insects, like fire ants or emerald ash borers.”
- In April 2021, North Carolina State Extension reported, “to date, this insect has never been spotted outside of Washington State or southwestern Canada. Previously established colonies and individuals, as of 2019-2020, were eradicated.”
- The US Department of Agriculture in 2021 allocated just under \$1 million to Asian giant hornet research and eradication efforts in Washington and other states.
- The Asian giant hornet is a predator of honeybees, and if it becomes established, it could devastate honeybee populations in the U.S.

How to tell the difference

Several wasp and hornet species in North Texas can be confused with the AGH/Northern Giant Hornet. The Cicada killer wasp species is the most misidentified due to its size (1.2 - 1.6 inches) and yellow banding on the abdomen. It can be recognized by its habit of flying back and forth, low over the ground, as it hunts for cicadas and its nest (a hole dug in soft ground) where it stashes the immobilized prey and lays eggs.

- The Asian giant hornet’s **head is as wide or wider than its shoulders**, whereas the look-alike Cicada killer wasp’s head is narrower than its shoulders.
- The Asian giant hornet’s **head color is much lighter than the thorax color**, whereas the Cicada killer wasp’s head color is about the same as their thorax.
- **Smooth-looking brown and orange stripes cover the abdomen** of the Asian giant hornet. The stripes on the Cicada killer wasp are jagged.



The link below is a helpful slide presentation prepared by the USDA illustrating the Asian giant hornet and many other common look-alikes that you may spot:

<https://txbeeinspection.tamu.edu/files/2020/05/Asian-Giant-Hornet-Look-alikes-101-Xanthe-Shirley.pdf>

If ever you're not sure, safely take some pictures and email them to us at the DCMGA Garden Help Desk master.gardener@denton.county.gov

You may also get an identification from Texas A&M AgriLife Extension through the [Online Insect Identification Form](#) (a fee may be required). Note their handy visual showing characteristics of the Cicada killer wasp.

Another option is to send photos/videos or dead specimens to the Texas A&M Department of Entomology following instructions at: <https://entomology.tamu.edu/urbanentomology/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2020/05/Asian-Giant-Hornet-ID-Form.pdf>

Resources

An Update on Asian Giant Hornets (April 2021), North Carolina State Extension: <http://go.ncsu.edu/readext?786108>

Asian Giant Hornet (murder hornet) and its Most Common Look-alike Texas Species (video), Texas A&M AgriLife: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjVEwHcNm9c>

Asian Giant Hornet (January 2021). National Invasive Species Information Center, U.S. Department of Agriculture: <https://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/terrestrial/invertebrates/asian-giant-hornet>

It's Big, But It's Not A 'Murder Hornet' (June 2020). Texas A&M TODAY: <https://today.tamu.edu/2020/06/30/its-big-but-its-not-a-murder-hornet/>