

# Landscapers versus Texas Critters Fact Sheet

HS06-002B (10-24)

**L**andscape workers in Texas face many hazards. In addition to sun, heat, cold, lawn equipment, and poisonous plants, encounters with insects, reptiles, and other animals are part of the daily risks. While some creatures are merely a nuisance, others are dangerous, even deadly. These tips help landscapers work safely around Texas critters.



## Insects

### *Bees and wasps*

#### **Honeybees:**

Honeybees are generally non-aggressive when gathering nectar if left undisturbed. Swarming honeybees typically do not bother humans.

#### **Africanized (killer) bees:**

Unlike honeybees, Africanized bees are extremely dangerous. They may swarm up to sixteen times a year.<sup>1</sup> Africanized bees can build hives in various structures, including buildings and drainage pipes. Once they establish a hive, they become aggressive. The noise from mowers and trimmers can disturb them, leading to attacks by hundreds of bees. They can chase a person up to a quarter of a mile and can sting through clothing.<sup>2</sup> Multiple stings can be fatal.

#### **Bumblebees:**

Bumblebees nest in the ground and can be disturbed by mowing or brush-clearing

operations. They will attack if their hive is threatened and can sting multiple times.

#### **Yellow jackets:**

Similar to bumblebees, yellow jackets nest underground and can also sting a worker multiple times.

#### **Wasps:**

Wasps often build paper nests in ornamental shrubs and trees and are usually aggressive when bothered.

#### **Hornets:**

These large wasps, which can grow larger than 2 inches in length, also build paper nests in shrubs or trees.<sup>3</sup> They prey on bees and yellow jackets and also sting humans.

#### **Safety tips:**

- Wear long-sleeved shirts and neckerchiefs.
- Carefully inspect each area for hives before trimming any bushes or using other motorized equipment.

- Avoid ejecting grass clippings into suspected areas with hives.
- Workers who trim shrubbery should carry long-range wasp spray.
- If attacked, cover your face, walk away slowly, and seek shelter in a building or vehicle.
- Remove a stinger by scraping it with a fingernail, credit card, or other straight edge. Avoid gouging the skin with tweezers or pinching it.<sup>4</sup>
- Apply ice to reduce swelling and seek medical help if stung multiple times.
- Seek immediate medical care if an allergic reaction occurs.

## Fire Ants

Common throughout Texas, fire ant nests appear as high mounds of loose soil up to 18 inches tall in pastures but usually no more than 4 inches on frequently mowed lawns.<sup>5</sup> When disturbed, hundreds of angry ants can attack a worker. A fire ant secures itself to its prey with a pair of clamp-like jaws. Once attached, the ant uses its abdominal stinger to inject alkaloid venom into the victim. Stings may develop pustules within a day.



### Safety tips:

- Avoid running over fire ant mounds with a mower.
- Apply ice packs (10 minutes on, 10 minutes off) for non-allergic stings.
- Monitor for infection until healed within three to eight days.
- Workers with fire-ant allergies should seek immediate medical care.

## Mosquitoes

Mosquitoes are most active at dawn and dusk. They can breed in as little as a tablespoon of water and transmit many dangerous diseases. The most common mosquito-borne disease in Texas is the West Nile virus.<sup>6</sup> Symptoms include fever, joint pain, headache, and rash. While most people infected with the disease do not know they have it, it can cause neurological problems in less than 1% of cases.<sup>7</sup>

### Safety tips:

- Outdoor workers should use insect repellent containing DEET to protect against mosquito-borne illnesses.
- Remove standing water around structures, empty trash cans, buckets, and other containers that hold water.

## Ticks

Ticks can carry diseases such as Lyme disease. In the early stages, it is usually treated with antibiotics for three weeks. If left untreated, it can lead to long-term pain, fatigue, and cognitive problems.<sup>8</sup>

### Safety tips:

- Wear long-sleeved, light-colored shirts and pants tucked into socks and closed-toe shoes.

- Apply a tick repellent containing DEET, picaridin, or Oil of Lemon Eucalyptus.
- Check the body for ticks at the end of each workday.
- Shower within two hours after being outdoors to wash off any unattached ticks.
- If a tick is found attached to the skin, grasp it near the head with fine-tipped tweezers and pull it out slowly without squeezing its body.



- Tumble dry clothes in a dryer on high heat for 10 minutes to kill any ticks.
- See a doctor immediately if severe headaches or joint pain develop within a week of being bitten.

- If bitten by any snake, seek medical help immediately.

## Reptiles

### Snakes

Texas is home to at least 15 venomous snakes.<sup>9</sup> Since identification can be challenging, it is best to avoid all snakes. They often seek environments under bushes or logs in warmer months or bask on roads or lawns in cooler months. Most snakes will flee when they hear humans approaching but may bite if surprised.

#### Safety tips:

- Avoid reaching into unseen areas.
- Use a stick or tool, instead of hands, to move rocks or logs.
- Step on top of logs or stones before stepping over them.

### Alligators

The American alligator is common in rivers, creeks, and backwater sloughs in East and South Texas.<sup>10</sup> An ever-expanding human population continues to encroach on their habitats. As a result, alligators have become an increasing threat to livestock, pets, and humans.

#### Safety tips:

- Check for alligators in streams or bayous in low-lying coastal areas before starting work near water.
- Never feed or harass alligators.
- Keep 30 feet away at all times.
- If one is too close, back away slowly.
- Do not assume that alligators are slow and sluggish. They are extremely quick and agile and will defend themselves if cornered.



## Other animals

### **Wild animals**

Even large cities have wild animals such as skunks, raccoons, opossums, foxes, coyotes, squirrels, and bats that are most active early in the morning or evening. Generally, these animals will flee when approached but always use caution.

#### **Safety tips:**

- If a skunk approaches and raises its tail, it is time to run.
- Animals that do not flee or act strangely may have rabies. Avoid them by leaving the area or seeking shelter.
- Report any suspicious animals to local animal control. They can test captured animals for rabies.
- If attacked by an animal, seek medical help immediately.

### **Domestic animals**

Pets often show aggressive, territorial behavior to protect their home, yard, or garden. Even gentle pets can sometimes attack without warning.

#### **Safety tips:**

- Ask about aggressive pets before work begins.

- Request that homeowners secure these animals before workers arrive.
- Treat unusually behaving pets with the same caution as wild animals, since dogs and cats can also contract rabies.

## Other safety measures

- Carry a first aid kit and know how to use it.
- Stay hydrated and take breaks to prevent heat-related illnesses.
- Be aware of the surroundings at all times.
- Train employees to recognize and respond to various animal threats.

By staying alert and following these guidelines, landscape workers can reduce the risks of Texas critters while they are on the job. Remember to keep safety as the top priority.

For more information on landscaping or groundskeeping safety, stream or download any of DWC's free occupational safety and health [videos](#) or [publications](#). Or contact a safety training specialist at 800-252-7031, option 2 or [safetytraining@tdi.texas.gov](mailto:safetytraining@tdi.texas.gov).

## References

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[www.txsafetyatwork.com](http://www.txsafetyatwork.com)

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