

Wasp nests and numbers generally drop off and die out by the end of June. However an increasing number of wasps are overwintering and survive the winter months. While this was always considered to be at around 10% of the nests sites, anecdotal evidence suggests the number could be a lot higher than this in parts of NZ, and is more evident in Northern parts of New Zealand with warmer climates.

Wasp workers will only live for around 2-4 weeks but the queen can live for 12 months and will overwinter alone in a hibernated state (if not in a nest). The queen looks similar to the workers and also has a sting, she is just a lot bigger. In the spring months the queen will move out from hibernation to begin building a nest. Initially she will forage for food and scrape wood to construct a few nest cells to lay a single egg in each. Once the first eggs hatch and emerge as adults some 30 to 50 days later (depending on environmental conditions) the queen will remain in the nest and rely solely on her workers for food.

New queens are produced in specially enlarged cells, in a comb near the bottom of the nest. An average wasp nest produces between 1,000 and 2,000 queens per season. The queens may remain in the nest while they build up fat for winter. Once emerged and with enough reserves, a suitable dry overwintering site will be found, often in firewood or under bark of a tree.

The overwintering queens that emerge from their sheltered sites are in a vulnerable state. Each foraging and nest building queen wasp can create many thousands of wasps, but in the early stages she doesn't have the support of a colony of workers and needs to build a nest and forage on her own. This is an opportune time to intervene and trap the queens. Every queen killed at this time is a potential nest eliminated.