

Lovebugs...They're Baaack!

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO BY Herman Auer

Lovebugs commonly occur in large swarms in the Galveston County area during mid-September. They occasionally produce smaller swarms in May when winter weather conditions have been favorable.

Periodically, I am asked how do I decide what topic to write about in this weekly column. Well, sometimes it's fairly straightforward as in last week's column on fruit orchard and garden tours. Other times, selecting the topic may be easy but preparing the article can be tedious. And, sometimes I am just fortunate in that a subject may scream "Write about me!"

Over the past few weeks, I have received many phone calls and e-mails from resi-

dents about "swarms" of small black and orange colored insects that are occurring in many areas of the county.

This week's subject presented itself again as I was recently dining with friends in a restaurant with a scenic view of Galveston Bay. Our window view of the Bay was mildly obstructed by the in-flight dances of dozens of insects in an amorous mood.

After some meditation, I ultimately made the deci-

sion to discuss these critters in this column due to the extent of residents' concerns. I use the words "meditation" and "ultimately" because discussing lovebugs can be a rather delicate subject!

What Are Lovebugs?

These insects belong to a diverse group of insects known as Diptera which includes many species of flies including the mosquito and the common housefly. The common name "lovebug" has been given



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Dr. William Johnson is a horticulturist with the Galveston County Office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Visit his website at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>.

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to these black-bodied flies (with a bright orange-colored head area) because they are most often seen flying around in mating pairs. Even though they are more noticeable as swarms, they commonly occur in less concentrated numbers also.

Where Do They Come From?

The immature or larval stage of lovebugs develops in moist habitats high in organic matter such as roadside ditches, bayous, and swampy areas. Soon after rainy periods in the spring and especially in the fall in wooded Upper Gulf Coast counties of Texas, lovebugs emerge as adults and mate in swarms around roads and buildings (including houses).

It has been thought that car fumes contained some properties that were attractive to these flies, but they are naturally attracted to open spaces within their generally wooded habitats.

What Damage Do They Do?

Adult lovebugs spend their time sipping nectar from flowers and searching for mates and mating while hovering in the air. Adult lovebugs do not bite or sting humans.

The immature or larval stage is quite harmless and actually helps nature by decomposing dead plant tissues. Although their behavior and their common name may be amusing, their presence in such large numbers can be somewhat of a nuisance.

Cars and trucks driven through these aerial orgies become splattered with these loving bugs. As a result, radiator fins may become clogged causing cars to overheat. Insects splattered on the windshields can obscure vision.

Be sure to clean off insects that had a head-on collision with your vehicle as soon as possible since their splattered remains can damage the paint finish. Use one of the commercially available products containing petroleum distillates advertised to facilitate the removal of dried insect parts from auto finishes.

Should They Be Controlled?

Unlike the case for several insect pests in the landscape, we cannot rely on natural enemies to help control lovebugs. In fact, it would appear that the major enemy of lovebugs in an urban environment would be cars, trucks and tractor trailers!

Because of their harmless biology, broad chemical control using insecticides is not recommended and is generally not effective. They do not respond to insect repellents such as citronella and DEET. Certain insecticides, such as fogs and aerosols designed to quickly knock down and kill many types of swarming adult insects, will affect exposed lovebugs.

However, these compounds are readily displaced by wind currents and are generally quick to lose effectiveness relative to the duration of the lovebug swarming period which may last several weeks.

When Do Swarms Occur?

Lovebugs are quite seasonal with May and September being the two major time periods to see swarms. Swarms in September tend to be considerably larger than those occurring in May.

In some years, swarms may be small and scattered. In other years, swarms can be huge and commonplace across the county.

Population size is influenced by environmental conditions. Extended periods of high soil moisture levels favor the development of the larval stages, i.e., high populations of lovebugs tend to occur when summer rainfall has been ample. However, populations of adult lovebugs may be drastically reduced by heavy rains.

All that can be done is to learn how to cope with lovebug swarms and perhaps marvel a bit at how lovebugs can stay so focused, living up to their amorous reputation despite our inadvertent actions to wipe them out on the highways!

The good news is that lovebug populations are on the decline for the spring season.

