Red velvet ants are wasps

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office

PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson

Red velvet ants are aptly named for their distinctive coloration but these insects are wasps, not ants. Pictured is a male red velvet ant. Females have similar coloration but lack wings.

July 27, 2011

Q: I found a large and brightly colored insect roving through the leaf litter in one of my landscape beds. Can you help identify it?

A: One of my Master Gardener volunteers brought in such a specimen last week and was curious if it was a type of ant.

Despite its common name of red velvet ant, it actually is a type of wasp.

Adult red velvet ants average 1/2 to 3/4 an inch in length. Males and females are jet black with distinctive patches of dense orange-red hair on the thorax and abdomen.

Females are wingless and are more commonly seen. In contrast, males have wings and are rarely seen.

Red velvet ants are also known as cow killers in reference to the painful sting these insects can inflict to man and animals, although it is very doubtful many cows actually are stung.

I strongly recommend not going barefoot in areas where this insect is spotted.

While females can pack a powerful sting, they are not aggressive. They tend to move quickly away when exposed. Males do not sting.

Red velvet ants are beneficial insects. Females seek the immature stages of bumblebees and other ground-nesting bees, digging down to the nesting chambers and chewing a hole through the cocoon.

She deposits an egg on the host larva, which soon hatches into a white, legless grub.

The immature velvet ant larva feeds on the larva of a ground-nesting bee, developing through several larval stages before forming a pupa.

Q: One of my trees was recently struck by lightning. Is there anything I can do to save the tree or is likely to die?

A: A lightning strike to a tree in the home landscape is a traumatic experience for both the tree and its caretaker.

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News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.

After checking to see if one's own limbs are intact, attention quickly shifts to the welfare of the tree.

The morning after an electrical storm, local extension offices often field questions from concerned homeowners regarding the prognosis for beloved trees and what care might be given to help them survive or recover.

Unfortunately, and quite accurately for the concerned tree steward, the best answer to these urgent questions often is "time will tell."

A lightning strike can affect a tree in many ways. Some are immediately obvious and some are not. Sometimes the trunk and/or large branches are splintered.

In many cases, the apparent damage might appear minimal while internal injury to the vascular tissues of the trunk and roots is extensive and gradually manifests itself during a period of months or even years.

In some cases, the majority of the damage occurs to the main roots of a tree as the electrical discharge (up to 100 million volts at thousands of amperes) vaporizes the water inside the roots, creating superheated steam.

It is difficult to predict which trees will be struck by lightning and which are most likely to be seriously injured.

In general, lone trees, those tallest in a group or those growing in moist soil have the highest probability of being struck.

In the considerable body of lightning lore, certain tree species commonly are listed as more lightning-attractive than others.

These include maple, ash, tulip tree, sycamore, poplar, oak, elm, pine, spruce and hemlock. Some of these species, like sycamores, likely are targets because they tend to tower over other species.

Pines and hemlocks might be lightning-prone because of the water that collects on their needles during thunderstorms.

Human nature causes people to develop strong attachments to trees. It is natural, therefore, to want to take immediate action to help an urban friend survive in the aftermath of a lightning strike.

In most cases, however, there is little that can be done to help a tree recover.

Should one apply any of the various wound dressing concoctions commonly used?

While most wound dressing concoctions do no harm to the tree, many dressings develop cracks in time that can harbor insects or hold water that lead to decay.

Applying a wound dressing might make the caretaker performing the operation feel better, but it is not recommended.

If the lightning damage has created hazardous broken branches, these should be taken care of quickly.

However, in most cases, it is best to wait six months before doing major (expensive) corrective work.

If, during this waiting period, the tree shows no obvious signs of decline, then it might be worth the expense to do major corrective pruning.

In the meantime, watering during drought conditions and fertilizing with a moderate rate of nitrogen might help the tree produce callus tissue to compartmentalize wounds.

In many cases, it will become obvious at some point during the waiting period that the tree will not recover and removal is the best option.

My experience has been that a lightning strike does not automatically spell doom to a tree, and many such trees are able to make a remarkable recovery given adequate care and time.