

# Lovebug Populations on the Decline

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office*



PHOTO BY **Herman Auer**

Swarms of lovebugs are common in September. Although their behavior and their common name may be amusing, their presence in large numbers can be somewhat of a nuisance when driving.



PHOTO BY **Heidi Sheesley**

Giant Blue Potato Vine is a majestic vine with large, tropical-looking foliage and large clusters of purple flowers all summer long.



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I received a phone call late last week from a lady asking why so many "Jack & Jills" were covering the exterior of her full-view glass storm door?

I figured this was going to be an interesting conversation. When I started in this position 25 years ago, I quickly learned to give a caller time to explain their problem. This approach is particularly appropriate in this case because I had no idea what Jack & Jills were!

The caller went on to mention that while growing up in Port Author, Texas, her parents called these insects Jack & Jills. I

asked her to describe them—you might call this stalling for time, I call it exercising patience in collecting valuable information.

When she mentioned that the insects had jet black bodies with distinctive red- to orange-colored "shoulders", I immediately thought "Eureka!" based on her notations about masses of insects with distinctive color patterns and their occurring at this time of year. The insects had to be lovebugs which have been seen in swarms over the past

few weeks.

The common name "lovebug" has been given to these black-bodied flies (with a bright red to orange-colored shoulder 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.

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).

Adult lovebugs spend their time sipping nectar from flowers and searching for mates and mating while hovering in the air. They 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 spattered with these loving bugs. As a result, radiator fins may become clogged causing cars to overheat. Insects spattered on the windshields can obscure vision.

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

Because of their harmless biology, broad chemical control using insecticides is not recommended. In fact, it would appear that the major enemy of lovebugs in an urban environment would be cars, trucks and tractor trailers!

Lovebugs are quite seasonal with May and September being the two major time periods to see swarms. Swarms in September tend to be 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. The good news is that lovebug populations are on the decline.

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 actions to wipe them out on the highways!

#### **Plant of the Week**

This week's Plant of the Week is the third of the series featuring plants with a proven record of performing well in the Galveston County growing area and which will be available at the 2014 Master Gardener Fall Plant Sale to be held on Saturday, October 11, at Carbide Park in La Marque.

This week's featured plant is Giant Blue Potato Vine. It's lamentable when an attractive ornamental plant is burdened with a common name like potato vine.

However, Giant Blue Potato Vine (*Solanum wendlandii*) is a majestic vine with large, tropical-looking foliage.

Giant Blue Potato Vine is large, semi-evergreen and vigorous vine from tropical Central America. It can grow to 10 to 15 feet tall and wide. It has large 4 to 8 inch long ovate thick leaves and produce large clusters of one and one-half inch to two-inch wide deep purple flowers that fade to lavender, then white over their long blooming period. Giant Blue Potato Vine flowers abundantly during months of the year from spring into fall. It will continue to produce scattered blooms during mild winters. Plant in full to partial sun in soil with good drainage. Giant Blue Potato Vine is hardy to 20° F. and can be grown as a container plant.

Giant Blue Potato Vine and a good selection of other vines for the home landscape will be available at the 2014 Plant Sale on Saturday, October 11. Visit our website (<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>) for updates and map directions.