Mosquitoes are annoying pests to humans and animals, and with all the wet weather we've been having, their numbers have increased.

Mosquitoes need water to breed and, unfortunately, the standing water left over from our recent storms has left an ideal breeding environment.

Mosquito larvae normally breed in quiet and still water or on extremely damp soils. Larvae cannot adapt to life in moving waters. Mosquitoes also will not breed in the heavy undergrowth of weeds, bushes or shrubs. Although these places provide excellent refuge for adult mosquitoes, they do not provide a suitable habitat for the larvae. Around the home, suitable places for egg-laying are the sides of containers, such as old tin cans or old tires, as well as plant containers and even the holes of trees.

It's true that mosquitoes may be attracted to feed on some individuals over others. Mosquitoes use odor and chemical cues to locate their food source. As the mosquito comes near a potential host, moist air from the host and visual cues become important. The chemical cues help the mosquito decide where to land.

Carbon dioxide exhaled by animals, including humans, is an example of a chemical cue that mosquitoes use to find their hosts. Some people may release different types or strengths of chemicals that will attract the mosquitoes more than others. Some mosquitoes will actively bite only at night, while others will readily feed during the day or at sunrise and sunset.

Mosquito control can be divided into two areas of responsibility: individual and public. Individuals are responsible to find and eliminate breeding places on their premises; This includes keeping anything that can retain water emptied at all times and maintaining window screens so they are kept tight and in good repair in order to keep mosquitoes from being a problem inside the house.

Personal protection from mosquito bites is best accomplished with the use of repellents. Repellents work by "confusing" the mosquito, keeping it from landing on or biting the intended host.

Several repellents are effective against mosquitoes. DEET, short for diethyltoluamide, is the most commonly used repellent. It is available in a liquid, aerosol, lotion, cream and even wipes. When applied properly to the neck, face, arms, ankles and other exposed skin surfaces, most repellents will provide protection from mosquito bites for two to 12 hours.

Another way to steer clear of mosquito bites is to avoid outdoor activities at dusk and dawn when mosquitoes are most active. If you must be outdoors during those times, cover up by wearing long-sleeved shirts, long pants, socks, shoes and a mosquito repellent. Osceola County does have an organized mosquito-control program but it is essential to also protect yourself by wearing a repellent Information for this article came from the University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Science publication Mosquitoes In and Around the Home.

For a free copy and for answers to other gardening or insect questions, contact Osceola County master gardeners at 321-697-3000. They are available from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Jennifer Welshans
Horticulture Agent