

HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

LOVEBUGS FOR FALL LOVEIN

Just like clockwork - they're back. Every May and September, we can rely on those pesky black bugs to once again splat against our windshields. What are they? *Plecia nearetica*, otherwise known as lovebugs.

Lovebugs migrated from Mexico along the Gulf coast. Southern Louisiana experienced flights of lovebugs during the 1920s, and Mississippi collected samples from the 1940s. First reports of their presence in Florida were made in 1947 from Escambia County. Subsequent reports indicate their presence in Leon County in 1955-56 and Alachua and Marion counties in 1964-65. Since that time, swarms have progressively moved southward. In 1974, specimens were collected as far south as Homestead. Lovebugs have also moved northward into Georgia and even South Carolina.

Two generations of lovebugs occur each year. The adult populations take flight during May and September and are present for approximately four weeks. Mating takes place almost immediately after emergence of the females, since adult females live only a few days. That is why lovebugs are attached when flying. During the mating process, the male lovebug attaches to the female and only separates during the daytime while resting on vegetation. They never separate during flight or at night. Successful mating takes as long as 12 hours, and the female dies within 86 hours of laying eggs.

You have probably noticed that lovebugs like to hang around gas stations. Automobile exhaust fumes, heat from the engines and the vibrations of the vehicles actually attract lovebugs, which often splatter against the front of your car. Lovebugs on or in the car is not a pretty sight. A buildup on the radiator may cause cars to overheat, their bodies on the windshield can reduce driver visibility, and fluid from their bodies can damage paint.

Several things can lessen the problem. By traveling at night, motorists can avoid the insects; lovebugs reach peak activity at 10 a.m.. and stop flying at dusk. Traveling slower will reduce the number of bugs splattered. A mesh screen in front of the grill will keep the radiator fins from clogging and protect the finish on the front of the car. If a large screen is not used in front of the grill, at least place a small screen behind the grill in front of the radiator.

Washing lovebug carcasses from vehicles within one day will help to reduce paint damage. Lovebugs are more easily removed, and the chance of damaging the finish is lessened, if the car has been waxed recently. Soaking for several minutes with water aids in removal. When lovebugs are numerous, some motorists spread a light film of baby oil over the front of the hood, above the windshield and on the grill and bumper. This practice will make removal a simpler task.

Adult lovebugs are harmless and do not sting or bite. They feed on the nectar of various plants, especially sweet clover, goldenrod and Brazilian pepper. Lovebugs are also beneficial to our environment, but that is true only during their immature life stage. Larvae feed on thatch in the lawn. Thatch is a layer of decaying organic material between the grass roots and leaf blades. If it builds up in the lawn, it can cause problems for the grass. Immature lovebugs live in the thatch and consume it. Through this process they redistribute essential nutrients back into the soil, benefiting plants.

A number of insecticides have been evaluated for effectiveness in controlling lovebug larvae and adults. Most kill lovebugs but are impractical because high populations of the insects occur over vast areas of the state. A vacuum cleaner can remove adults from confined areas, such as in buildings and vehicles. Natural controls do exist: natural predators, a low amount of rainfall, and several types of fungi that influence mortality rate upon ingestion.

Information for this article was taken from the UF/IFAS publication *Lovebugs in Florida*. For more information on gardening, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at 321-697-3000.

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Date: September 18, 2005