HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

LOVEBUGS

Their love affair is over. I personally terminated more than 1000 honeymoon couples and watched them plunge head on into the whiteness of death. Well, I watched as best I could through the smeared windshield of the county van as I returned from Kenansville and the honeymoon suite of millions of our wild neighbors. I was practicing integrated pest management (IPM) while transporting my guests for a farm tour. I was implementing a nontoxic but lethal method of lovebug annihilation: death by vehicle.

While vehicular homicide is very effective, it is expensive and time consuming. I spent 30 minutes scrubbing the van to remove lovebug carcasses and maintain the newly detailed finish of our county vehicle.

The seasonal economic impact to the car wash industry is unmeasured, but think of a few ways to calculate the scale of the problem. Figure the value of the daily car wash each afternoon after driving in the thick of the swarms, the sales of after-market bug screens and home remedies applied to prevent the acids from the bug body fluids and egg masses from damaging the finish, the number of jobs supported and sales tax paid and you have quite a few dollars. And lovebug season occurs twice a year.

IPM is the use of a variety of methods for managing pests. While patience is not normally included as a strategy, it is the only one I can suggest for lovebugs. Our current best option is to take a twelve step recovery approach of acceptance and move on. The insects are a cyclic pest and like snow or thunderstorms, come and go without our control. Have patience and this too shall pass.

Lovebugs found their way into Florida over 50 years ago, but the economic impact has not been great enough to warrant the research needed to identify effective IPM strategies which would eliminate their splattered corpses on our windshields and bodies on our sidewalks.

Quarantine and inspections are IPM tools used to keep pests from entering our country. Too late on that tool. The lovebugs are already here. Contrary to urban legends and rumors, the University of Florida did not import the lovebug to control mosquitoes or accidentally release them. They are an exotic species that naturally migrated to the Southeastern US from Central America. Lovebugs exist from Costa Rica to South Carolina. They were first identified in west Florida in the late 1940's and were previously identified in Texas and Louisiana.

Once pests arrive and become problems, chemical controls are sometimes considered an IPM option for destruction. New types of chemicals are designed to be pest specific and only target the pest not other critters that might be beneficial or even harmless. Since lovebugs are so widespread, chemical applications are too costly to apply. In addition, the ones that exist are too broad spectrum and would kill many beneficial insects such as bees and butterflies.

Sometimes, we discover organisms that kill or wound pests. These biological controls are some of the newest non-chemical IPM methods to manage pests. Lovebugs have some natural enemies besides heavy traffic. UF researchers and others have identified a few fungal diseases that kill lovebugs and birds and other animals do eat some of them. More research could identify more effective biocontrols and understand the conditions that contribute to peak hatches some years and light infestations at other times.

Mechanical IPM includes methods such as trapping, or manipulating the conditions that lovebugs prefer. They are difficult to trap since it seems there is an endless supply but screen porches and keeping doors and windows closed are effective mechanical control measures to help keep them
outside. If they get inside, let them die and dehydrate before you vacuum them.

Young worm-like lovebugs live in pastures and native grasslands and are decomposers, feeding on decaying vegetation in moist soils. Immature lovebugs develop into the adult flies and emerge from the soil. Adults feed on wildflower nectar and breed, remaining coupled for a few days, if they are lucky. The romance only lasts a few days, less if the pair find each other near a highway. Drive at night to avoid the messy windshield and overheated radiator since their peak mating flights are during mid day.

Though lovebugs can be found year round, they tend to have two cycles in our Central Florida area, generally March-April and September-October, with the fall being the heaviest swarming time. The good news is there is a season and the cycle should be waning soon. Just hold off a few more weeks if you need to do any outdoor painting.

If you want more information on lovebugs, request a fact sheet from UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension at 321-697-3000 or search for the keyword lovebug on the new UF/IFAS web portal at SolutionsforYourLife.com.

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