

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO CREDIT: Dr. William M. Johnson



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**Swarms of lovebugs are commonly seen from mid-August to September. Although their behavior and their common name may be amusing, their presence in large numbers can be somewhat of a nuisance when driving.**

Periodically, I am asked how I decide what topic to write about in this weekly column. Well, sometimes it's a straightforward process as in last week's column about pruning and fertilizing plants in the landscape.

Other times, selecting the topic may be easy but preparing the article can be tedious. And, sometimes I

am just fortunate in that a subject may scream "Write about me!" and it turned out to be an enjoyable article to write.

Over the past few weeks, I have received many phone calls and e-mails from residents about "swarms" of small, black and red-colored insects that are occurring in many areas of the county.

The most notable phone call came 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, I quickly learned to give a caller time to explain their



problem. This approach was 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-colored "shoulders," I immediately thought "Eureka!" Based on her conversation about masses of insects "flying in pairs" with distinctive color patterns and their occurring at this time of year, I quickly surmised that the insects had to be lovebugs which have been seen in swarms over the past few weeks.

While this insect is also known as the honeymoon fly or double-headed bug, lovebug is the most commonly used name given to these insects.

I've been noticing small populations of these flies occurring around my office building located in Carbide Park and, over the past couple of weeks, their populations have been increasing in the Discovery Garden located near my office.

Over the weekend, I traveled with some friends to Kingston, LA, located in the northern region of the state. As we neared Kingston, I could hear the audible pings of insects as they encountered the wind-

shield. Upon arrival, I quickly noticed a sizable collection of smashed insect remains that covered the car's grill and bumper. The vast majority of other cars in the parking lot were similarly littered. Had there been a car wash station nearby, considerable revenue would have been generated that day.

After some contemplation, I decided to discuss these critters in this column due to the extent of concerns expressed by area residents. I use the term "contemplation" because discussing lovebugs can be a rather delicate subject!

**What Are Lovebugs?** These insects belong to a diverse group of insects known as Diptera which includes many species of flies including the mosquito and the common housefly. Even though they are more noticeable as swarms, they commonly occur in less concentrated numbers also.

**Where Do They Come From?** The immature or larval stage of lovebugs develops in moist habitats high in organic matter such as roadside ditches, bayous, and swampy areas.

**What Damage Do They Do?** Adult lovebugs spend their time sipping nectar from flowers, searching for mates and mating while hovering in the air. Adult lovebugs do not bite or sting humans.

The immature or larval stage is quite harmless and aids in breaking down dead plant tissues. Alt-

hough their behavior and their common name may be amusing, their presence in such large numbers can be somewhat of a nuisance.

Be sure to clean off insects that had a head-on collision with your vehicle as soon as possible since their splattered remains can damage paint finishes when their acidic body fluids are left on a vehicle. Use one of the commercially available products containing petroleum distillates advertised to facilitate the removal of dried insect parts from auto finishes.

**Should They Be Controlled?** The average life span of a female lovebug is only 2-3 days. Because of their harmless biology, broad chemical control using insecticides is not recommended and is generally not effective. In fact, the major enemy of lovebugs in an urban environment would be cars, trucks and tractor trailers!

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 inadvertent actions to wipe them out on the highways!