

Marian St. Clair
Gardening

Cicadas coming soon to a tree near you

If you like bugs, I've got some good news; if you don't, steel yourself. Parts of South Carolina, particularly the Upstate, will experience a major emergence of 13-year periodical cicadas in the next few weeks, and the event is going to make last year's eruption of stink bugs look like child's play.

Don't be alarmed, however. Cory Tanner, Greenville's Horticulture Agent with Clemson University Extension Service, says the big bugs will make a lot of noise but pose no threat to humans and won't do any long-term damage to our landscapes either.

In fact, both Tanner and Eric Benson, extension entomologist, hope we'll get excited about the cicada emergence and help the university collect data documenting the 2011 event. Benson even says that lots of bugs will be a good thing, as the number of cicadas will be a measure of environmental health.

To make it easier to exchange information and collect data, Benson and other colleagues have set up ClemsonCicada, an Internet blog at http://clemsoncicada.wordpress.com/.

The website is easy to use, and when the reports start to come in, it will be interesting to hear what's going on in other communities.

Though I can't claim to have any expertise regarding cicadas, I do remember a long-ago visit to West Virginia when the insects had emerged in mass and thousands upon thousands

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Gannett

Red eyes, legs and wing veins distinguish the 13-year periodic cicada from other species.

of their molted nymphal skins clung to tree trunks, window screens and nearly every other outdoor surface. I also recall that cats loved catching and eating the big bugs.

And who can forget the ear-splitting racket the males make, day in and day out? Their efforts to attract a mate can be really annoying, so I'm planning to arm myself with a supply of ear plugs this time around.

I've heard cicadas called "jar flies" and "dry flies," and some people refer to them as locusts. The reason behind "jar fly" is unknown to me, but "dry fly" is a reference to the molted skin. Cicadas are not related to true locusts, which are a type of grasshopper, but are close kin to leafhoppers and spittlebugs.

There are many types of common cicadas with shorter life cycles that appear every year. These insects are typically larger than periodical species and are blackish with green markings. The 13-year cicada, which evolved as a response to predators, is about an inch and a half long and has a stout black body and reddish-orange eyes, legs and wing veins.

According to the Clemson blog, the 1985 adult cicadas began to emerge in Abbeville and Saluda counties around April 21. However, the 1998 cicadas were delayed by cold weather and the emergence was less pronounced. Since then, the 13-year cicada nymphs have been underground, sucking sap from roots and waiting for their big day.

This year's emergence, once it begins, will last one to two weeks and the adults will live for roughly three weeks. During that time, the adult insects will suck sap from tender twigs and the female will use a chisel-like ovipositor to cut slits in twigs to lay 24 to 48 eggs, splintering sapwood in the process.

Each female can lay as many as 600 eggs during her short life. Eggs hatch in six to seven weeks, and then the small ant-like nymphs drop to the ground where they burrow down to the tree roots and complete another 13-year life cycle.

Many trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants are used for egg laying, but oak, hickory, apple and sweet gum are the preferred hosts. You might note damage on dogwoods, blueberries and azaleas too.

In a major emergence, it's impossible to protect large trees. However, if you see significant cicadas around a small, prized ornamental, Tanner says you can cover it with a fine netting or cheese cloth to minimize damage.

Otherwise, chill out and enjoy the spectacle. After all, it will be a long stretch before these bugs return.

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