



## **13-year cicadas ... loud and annoying but harmless to humans and pets**

**Question:** What is going on with the red-eyed bugs hanging in the trees or flying around like little missiles? They make an awful racket and sound like space ships making a really shrill noise that goes on and on. It's enough to make me stay inside – what are they and how long will they be here?

**Answer:** To those of you in areas experiencing these insects, they are officially known as periodical cicadas. Not to be confused with locusts or annual cicadas, these insects have waited 13 years underground to take their turn as mature adults before mating and dying.

These are part of what is known as Brood XIX (19<sup>th</sup>) or the Great Southern Brood, the country's largest group of 13-year cicadas. This brood spans 12 states, including Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Illinois and Georgia. Their mating calls, produced by males of the species (females are mute, for all practical purposes), are in the 100+ decibel range, which is pretty loud. But apart from their racket and shaking them out of clothing, hair, and open containers, they are harmless to humans as they neither bite nor sting.

Their life cycle is worth noting, not only because after the 4-6 week mating period they'll disappear for another 13 years, but because the synchronized appearance of thousands of them at one time creates an event comparable to a natural phenomena.

Since the last emergence of the 13-year cicada, in 1998 (check your math), cicada nymphs have been feeding underground on plant roots with their piercing-sucking mouthparts. When soil temperatures are around 65 degrees, soft-bodied nymphs emerge from the ground, crawl to nearby trees, and pump blood into their wings. Wings and bodies harden, and about 5 days after emerging from the ground, males begin their 'hard-rock' songs to attract a female, and then mating occurs.

After mating, the female uses her ovipositor (egg-laying device) to make rows of slits in branches of twigs that are about the size of a pencil. Into these slits she lays her eggs – several in each one, and she can lay up to 600 eggs during her short lifetime. While the slit-making and egg-laying are not problems for mature trees, these activities can cause branches to die or "flag." Where flagging occurs, damaged branches turn red or brown, and often the damaged twig drops to the ground. Over 75 species of shrubs and trees are hosts for the female's egg-laying activities; oaks, hickories, apples, sweet gum, dogwood, blueberries and azaleas are common

targets. Six or seven weeks after eggs are laid, nymphs emerge, drop to the ground, maneuver down to plant roots, and prepare to spend the next 13 years in that location.

Why do so many emerge at one time? One theory for their mass emergence is a survival trait called “predator satiation,” because for the first week after leaving the safety of their underground home, it’s feeding time for several critters. Reptiles, birds, squirrels, and other small mammals are happy to see the cicadas. Even your cat or dog can find them attractive, and won’t be harmed by eating them. Others that are eager to benefit from the cicada’s emergence? Fishermen, who maintain they are “perfect bait,” and advise fellow fisher folk to ‘take vacation from your job, leave your spouse and kids at home. It’s time to go fishing.’ Fly fishermen in particular are pumped up about cicadas, so if you have one in your household, beware!

The good news? Around here, by late May to mid June most of the adults will be gone, their reproductive frenzy burned out and a new generation existing in eggs laid in slits on the underside of branches. There’s no need to try spraying; nothing is labeled for cicada control. Remaining carcasses decompose on the ground, adding nutrients to the soil. In addition, it is theorized that some wildlife populations, such as wild turkeys, benefit from the increased nutrition in their food supply from eating adult cicadas.

For more information about this topic or other horticulture related questions, please contact Sallie Lee, Urban Regional Extension Agent at the St. Clair County Extension office by calling (205) 338-9416 or email [leesall@aces.edu](mailto:leesall@aces.edu).