Fire Ant Update

By Paul McKenzie

Over the years, fire ants have been making a slow but steady march across our state. Recently they have become more prevalent in this area, especially in Vance County. This is a problem that we are going to have to learn to manage, as they will be with us for the foreseeable future.

Fire ants are a smallish dark-colored ant (dark to reddish brown). Their mounds are distinctive due to their large size. Fire ants are also much more aggressive than other ant species, swarming out of their mound en-masse at the slightest disturbance. There are many products available to manage them, most of which fall into one of the following two categories: baits and contact poisons.

Treating with baits – Baits can be used to treat individual mounds, or can be broadcast over a large area. Since they can be easily broadcast, they are generally more convenient for treating an area with multiple mounds. They are, however, slow acting. This makes them less desirable for a situation where instant control is needed (e.g. next to a sidewalk or on a playground). Also note that bait products have very specific requirements regarding temperature and moisture levels. Failure to adhere to the specifications will result in drastically reduced effectiveness.

Treating with contact poisons – Contact poisons can provide instant control, which is desirable in situations where people are more likely to stumble upon the mounds. The key to effective control is to deliver the chemical to the depths of the mound where the queen resides. If the queen is not killed, the remaining workers will simply move her and build a new mound. The delivery method varies with the product. Some are mixed with water to form a solution which is then applied to the mound. A watering can is one of the best ways to apply the solution. Others are granular products which are sprinkled over the mound and then gently watered in. Still another product comes in a dust which is sprinkled over the mound. The ants then track the poison into the mound as they come and go.

Please note that treating with gasoline is highly undesirable due to health, safety, environmental, and legal reasons. Also note that fire ant activity greatly diminishes during the winter, and an especially cold winter will kill off significant numbers.
NOVEMBER TO DO!

Fruits and Veggies
By Carl Shafer, Master Gardener, Vance County

- Remove any old mummified fruit on trees, bushes, or vines and from the ground as these can be sources of disease next year.
- Late fall and early winter is good time to plant fruit trees.
- Plant your garlic now if you have not already done so.
- Continue to collect leaves and compost them.
- Clean and repair if necessary your garden tools before putting them away for the winter.
- Use the internet to order some seed catalogs if you are interested in trying some new or different vegetable varieties next year. Also most garden magazines, at this time of the year, will have many mail order seed company advertisements.

Landscaping & Lawn Care
By Onda Marable, Master Gardener, Vance County

- Start paperwhite bulbs for holiday blooms. Start pots outdoors in a sunny spot until the bulbs break the soil surface, then bring inside.
- Dig any remaining tender bulbs and store in a nonfreezing environment.
- Move any perennials that are crowded or in the wrong place so they can reestablish over the winter.
- Mulch to protect plant roots from freezing. This is a good time to mark your perennial.
- Finish cleaning your beds but remember to leave flower seed heads for the birds to eat during the cold weather.
- Take advantage of dried seed heads and grasses to make fall decorations.
- Think about adding plants with winter interest to your garden, beautyberry, hellebores, witch hazel to name a few.
- Water your cool season grasses when needed and mow when they begin to look ragged.
- Remember to weed thoroughly to cut down on seeds that will sprout next spring.
- Think about which annuals could be brought inside to brighten the dull cold days and improve indoor air quality.

PESTS!!
Submitted By Cynthia Dickinson, Master Gardener, Warren County

Text and photos excerpted from NCSU Department of Entomology “Insect Notes” website.

Wheel bugs are large (up to 1-3/8 inches), brown to gray bugs with a dark, shining area of the wings over the rear of the body. Antennae are thin and rusty brown. There is a conspicuous raised half "cogwheel" on the thorax. Adults are striking red when they first present, but soon take on the cryptic gray coloration. Young bug nymphs are bright red with black markings, whereas older nymphs are colored like adults. Nymphs grow from about 1/8 to 1 inch. The eggs are dark brown and about 1/8 inch long with a tan rim around the top. The top has a dark brown center. The egg is bottle shaped and is glued down in a mass of 42-182 eggs which forms an irregular, raised patch.

Wheel bugs occur throughout North Carolina. They feed voraciously on caterpillars, such as the fall webworm and imported cabbageworm. Wheel bugs have been reported to feed on locust borer adults on goldenrod, Japanese beetles, eleven-spotted cucumber beetles, leafmining beetle larvae inside the leaf and other insects. Female wheel bugs sometimes kill and feed on male wheel bugs after mating. Wheel bug nymphs feed on aphids and other small insects.

If handled carelessly, wheel bugs may inflict a painful bite on people. Such a bite has been described as "much more powerful than a hornet or wasp sting". Injury from a wheel bug bite takes about 10 days to heal and leaves a small scar.

Female wheel bugs lay masses of 42-182 eggs by gluing them to bark or some object. Wheel bugs overwinter as eggs. Tiny wheel bug nymphs hatch in April and May and begin to feed on aphids and other small insects. Adult wheel bugs feed on large hornworm caterpillars.

Because wheel bugs prey upon plant pests, and because wheel bug numbers are usually low, control of wheel bugs is not warranted. Direct handling of wheel bugs should be avoided since they can inflict a painful bite. If these bugs are a nuisance, they can be safely dislodged with a stick, brush or some other object and relocated.
ROSE TIPS FOR THE MONTH
By Heidi Moore, Master Gardener, Warren County

As the weather gets colder, it is time to change rose gardening procedures. I discontinue deadheading my hybrid roses at this time, giving my plants the message that it is time to cease producing new shoots. As you already know, pruning your plants throughout the growing period encourages the plant to produce new growth and flowers. My hybrids are covered with new buds which may not have a chance to open due to the very cold nights. I have learned over my 35 years of rose gardening that roses will continue to produce flowers until the temperatures drop well below the freezing level. They recover during the day with the warmth of the sun, even on chilly days. I do continue to spray for black spot during November. The recommended month to start winter procedures, for roses in North Carolina, is December.

It is vital to continue to keep your rose garden, and all areas immediately surrounding your plants, free of debris which will accumulate during this time of year. If left unattended, this debris will begin to harbor diseases and insects that will winter over.

Also, please be sure not to do any severe pruning during the fall or winter months. If you have plants that need to be moved, wait until February. Mark the plants that need to be relocated so you will remember to do so in the spring. Let your plants continue to bloom and enjoy whatever flowers may be picked to enjoy in your home during November. If the outer petals become bruised from the cold, just pull them off and the flower will open beautifully. If well cared for, your hybrid bushes will produce some awarding winning roses this time of year.

PLANT OF THE MONTH
By Marty Finkel, Master Gardener, Granville County

Strawberry Tree (Arbutus unedo)
Another reason to join the Raulston Arboretum in Raleigh, if you’re not already a member, is that they give away great plants. An example is the Strawberry Tree, which is a slow grower with mature height at around 10 to 15 ‘over a period of years. It keeps its fine-textured, dark green leaves year round. It is really a shrub rather than a tree, although with attention to pruning one could give it a tree shape. The largest one I have seen was at Dr. Charlie Keith’s arboretum on our October field trip, and it was about 10’ tall by about 4 or 5’ in width, with a bush shape.

The photograph shows flower buds, and it can bloom from October to December with small, white to pinkish blueberry-like flowers, i.e. urn shaped. Each flower stem has several flowers arranged in a panicle about 2” long. What is really striking is the brilliance of the colored fruits. They ripen a year after flowering so there can be flowers and fruits on the tree at the same time! The fruit is about ¾” in diameter, roundish, orange-red, berry-like with a granular surface and meaty flesh, hence the origin of the common name. Dirr, in Manual of Woody Landscape Plants, says the fruit is supposedly edible but bland. It appears to be self-fruitful, as well. I have both the species and the cultivar ‘Elfin King,’ the latter with an eventual mature height of about 5 to 10’. It grows in sun to light shade, in moist, well drained garden soil. Dirr further says it tolerates dry conditions once well established. There are no serious pests or diseases.

It is native to southwestern Ireland, and on a garden trip to Ireland a few years ago, I was pleased to see so many that after a while one just took them for granted. Dirr says the plant has been cultivated for centuries.
INTERESTING TIDBITS

By Marty Finkel, Master Gardener, Granville County

This may be obvious to everyone, but I thought it might be helpful in determining the location of microclimates. Note locations where the first frost has not killed normally susceptible plants, such as along the side of a garage or house, under larger shrubs, etc. If other plants like these have been killed or injured elsewhere, it’s a pretty good bet the survivors are in a warmer microclimate. This information might be useful in locating marginally hardy plants in the future.

If you want fragrance this spring, plant these viburnums this month: Burkwood viburnum, *V. x burkwoodii*, which has a spicy, aromatic odor to its white flowers. It is semi-evergreen and grows to about 8 to 10’ with a spread 2/3’s its height. The pink-budded white flowers of the Korean spicebush, *V. carlesii*, are extremely fragrant, blooming in May. It is deciduous and grows to about 4 to 5’ and about that wide, but can grow larger. In an article on viburnums in the Oct./Nov. 2008 issue of Horticulture magazine, Dan Hinkley mentions that the Chinese *V. henryi* has flowers that emit an overwhelming fragrance of honey. This viburnum has leathery, 4-inch long deep green leaves on a rounded shape growing to about 6’ high, and it is evergreen.

Here’s a pretty good idea for recycling socks plus protecting your forearms from scratches and irritants while gardening: Cut out the toes of the socks, slip them over your hands, and pull up.

Ever have trouble keeping a shovel and rake on your wheelbarrow as you go from place to place? Attach two large, inexpensive spring clamps to the side of the wheelbarrow’s bucket about 2 feet apart. Rest the long-handled tools between the handles. This and the sock tip are from the Dec. 2008, No. 124 issue of Fine Gardening magazine.

Recommendations for the use of chemicals are included in this publication as a convenience to the reader. The use of brand names and any mention or listing of commercial products or services in this publication does not imply endorsement by NC State University, NC A&T State University or NC Cooperative Extension nor discrimination against similar products or services not mentioned. Individuals who use chemicals are responsible for ensuring that the intended use complies with current regulations and conforms to the product label. Be sure to obtain current information about usage regulations and examine a current product label before applying any chemical. For assistance, contact an agent of NC Cooperative Extension.

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