



The Insect “Revue”

This is the month when insect and arthropod identification eases off, so November is the month I usually review what the committee did for clients this year. I know I spelled review wrong in the title, but it sort of shows that a lot of insects were paraded by the committee. You know, like a Broadway “revue”? Just a little attempt at humor there!

We had another year when a lot of spiders showed up in the office. Brought in by clients, I mean. We had quite a few giant house spiders dropped off by the public for identification. Their large size (actually their long legs reaching out about 2 1/2 inches) makes them appear to be frightening and dangerous, even though they are not harmful. We also had many Hobo spiders brought in. We identify the Hobos by dissecting the males pedipalps to look at the structure. We also got our share of the beneficial black, hairy jumping spiders. We normally release them, unharmed, outside of the Extension Office because they control the undesirable insects in the MG garden there.

This was really the “year of the leafhopper”. Sounds sort of like a creature from the Chinese calendar! With the spring rains, we had an abundant growth of field crops. It also stimulated the reproduction of thousands of leafhoppers, especially in the grass fields. As the grasses dried out or were harvested, the little 1/8th inch Homopterans had no food and so went searching - into peoples yards, their homes and wherever, looking for green plants. People would go out in their yards and, as they walked, chase the leafhoppers up by the hundreds. They were usually described as “tiny hopping, flying things in my lawn”.

Another tiny hopper was brought in quite regularly. These were Collembola or “springtails”. In order to see them in detail, one needs a hand lens or dissecting microscope. People would see them in their kitchens around the sink or outside in damp areas. They were worried they had an infestation of something that might be harmful to their food or clothing. Springtails like damp environments. That is because they feed on molds and microscopic bits of food that we drop on the floor. They are very curious in that they possess a furculum, which is a forked appendage at the end of their abdomen. This fork is bent forward to a button-like knob on the bottom of their thorax and is fixed to this button. When in danger, the fork is released from the button and acts somewhat like an upside down mousetrap to propel the springtail through the air to another location. A very clever arrangement!

Other creatures were also brought into the office, but those above seemed to be the ones most often submitted to the committee during this growing season. Hope you had a successful and satisfying garden year and that the insects left your plants alone!

