

The Year of the Hopper!



It looks like this is going to end up being the year of the hoppers! Leafhoppers, that is! We have had clients bring in hundreds of the small creatures that have invaded their yards and homes for identification and advice by the Insect Committee. Because of the large number of requests, we can usually do the identification by just talking to the client over the phone and asking questions, even without a specimen in hand.

Leafhoppers belong to the insect Order Homoptera. They are usually small (a little more than 1/8"), have piercing, sucking mouthparts and hold their membranous wings tent-like over their bodies. The color varies with the various species, but is normally a dull brown color, although some species are very colorful with

reds, greens and yellows in interesting patterns. Some even have bizarre shapes emanating from their thorax, causing them to be camouflaged from their enemies. Take a look at the book "Insects" by Simon and Schuster in the MG office to see some of these more unusual shapes.

The leafhoppers we see being brought into the office this year are of the non-descript variety. They seem to fly around day and night and are a real nuisance to residents in the county. They started showing up near the last week in July, and we have had as many as 8 samples at a time to identify at some of our meetings. They don't bite or destroy garden plants, but enter the house through small openings and are a problem simply because of their sheer numbers.

The explanation of the invasion is rather simple. We had excess rain and heat when the grass plants in the farm fields were growing, causing a proliferation of leafhoppers (this variety feeds on the stems and leaves of grasses). As the summer progressed, the food supply began to dry up as the fields matured and were harvested, and the hoppers needed to find a new source of green grasses on which to feed. As flying adults, they began searching everywhere for this new supply. With thousands of adults seeking food, they entered the urban communities and became a pest swarm.

So, what do you do about them? Our advice to the people who call in or bring in specimens is to wait it out. Not finding an adequate food source, the adults will die out and the problem is over. Some have already said that they are finding piles of dead leafhoppers around their porch lights and other outdoor light sources. Eventually, the balance of nature will be restored for the correct number of leafhoppers in the area and we will be back where we were before the invasion.

Insects are opportunists, if we give them a chance to have access to a lot of food and reproduce indiscriminately, they will! If we interrupt their food cycle or reproductive cycle we are able to keep them in check. It is interesting that nature strives to keep a balance between the various living things on earth!

