

Lovebugs are inconvenient but don't pose any real threat
By: Corine Burgess

Florida is a great place to live. We have beautiful climate year round and plenty of diverse plant communities. But living here is not all sunshine and palm trees waving in the breeze. Floridians have to put up with mosquitoes in the summer months and two times each year, we have to live through the torture of lovebug season. Every May and September we are swarmed with the black and orange insects that plaster our car's windshields and grills. But there are a few things that you can do to make the difficult times more bearable.

Lovebugs are related to gnats and mosquitoes. The males are about ¼ inch and the females are a little longer. They are completely black except for a patch of red on their thoraxes. They are native to Central America and they migrate to sunny Florida each year. Although they are thought to be pest by most folks, lovebugs are completely harmless. They do not sting, bite or carry disease.

Lovebug flights can number in the thousands. In spring and summer, the insect's visits last about four to five weeks at a time. One of the reasons that there are so many of the creatures is because they mate as soon as they emerge from their pupa. Lovebugs exhibit the complete metamorphosis cycle: egg, larva, pupa and adult. A female deposits about 350 eggs under decaying vegetation. Soon the larvae emerge and move to an ideal location. They feed on decomposing leaves and grass until they pupate. The pupal stage lasts from 7 – 9 days. The adults only live about 3 or 4 days. During their short life they mate, feed, disperse and deposit a batch of eggs. Males prefer larger and heavier females. Females will fly into a swarm and are grasped by a male. Once the male has successfully captured his mate, the pair will land on nearby vegetation and mate. The male faces the opposite direction from the female and the mating begins, thus the name lovebugs. The pair will stay attached and the female initiates and controls the flight. Once the pair separates, the female lays her eggs and dies.

Lovebugs will not fly at night. They will begin hovering in the late afternoon and continue until sunset. Once it is dark the flying comes to a halt. The pair will land on vegetation and stay throughout the night. During the day, they are attracted to light colored surfaces, especially fresh paint. They are also attracted to the smell of automobile fumes, which mimics organic compounds that confuse the female. This explains why the insects are so numerous on roadways. They are also attracted to freshly cut lawns, animal pastures and decaying vegetation.

There are several things you can do to make these lovebug seasons more tolerable. First, try to travel at night if possible. Also travel at lower speeds and you won't get quite as many of the splats on your windshield. You can purchase a screen for your grill. Keep your vehicle waxed; dead lovebugs are much easier to remove off of a slick surface. Before removing the lovebugs, soak the area with water for several minutes. If you must travel during peak lovebug hours, try spreading a light film of baby oil or aerosol oil spray over the front of the hood and above the windshield, and on the grill and bumper. This makes lovebug removal much easier. Don't paint in lovebug season and keep to darker surfaces when outdoors.

Lovebugs are herbivores and feed on pollen and nectar found in different plants and flowers. Although we think of them as pests, they do have some positive characteristics. Females lay their eggs on the ground in decaying vegetation. The larvae help break it down, enriching the soil. They are great indicators of signal changes in the seasons from spring to summer and from summer to fall. Although they are tiny, if we could see them for what they really look like, we would notice that they are quite delicate looking insects. The males have big, round eyes and they are quite beautiful as they sail from flower to flower much like a butterfly or hummingbird.

Even though lovebugs cause us inconvenience, we Floridians have come to accept them as a normal part of living here, much like the pesky mosquito. The bugs are not as abundant as they were 30 years ago. We can take comfort in the fact that these insects do not threaten us by causing health or environmental problems.

So, keep your chin up. We only have to deal with these pesky bugs twice a year and it's only for a short time. Once they are gone, you'll forget all about them until they come back next year!