

THEY'RE COMING! THEY'RE COMING! CICADAS, THAT IS.

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They look like new monsters from *Alien* or *Star Wars*. Stubby, thick, three inches or longer body; orange-veined, cellophane-like wings; enormous red eyes; six legs. These are 17-year (periodical) cicadas. Annual cicadas, on the other hand, are black and green. We in the mid-Atlantic and Midwest regions (in about 15 states) are supposed to witness billions of cicadas bursting from the ground in the next few weeks. Do we really need to be so afraid of them?

The short answer is no. Some people confuse cicadas with locusts, but locusts are in the grasshopper family. When locusts swarm, they can do extensive damage to vegetation and farmers' crops. Cicadas are an entirely different insect, according to numerous web sites. Their damage is much less, only feeding on the juices of trees. They don't bite or sting.

According to an April 30 e-communication from Madeleine Potter, intern in Dr. Paula Shrewsbury's entomology lab at the University of Maryland, entomologists have already seen early riser cicadas, nymphs, and molting adults on the University of Maryland campus. The UMD groups also track soil temperatures; last week it was 62° F, and Ms. Potter said, "We are getting close to the magic 64° F soil temperature for emergence of fifth instar nymphs from the soil."

Ms. Potter noted that "Three species of 17-year periodical cicadas will all emerge at once [in May]. This is a rare and incredible biological event that only occurs in this part of the world, for these cicada species! The cicadas are a part of our food web, providing lots of animals rich nutrients and the soil rich compost."

In many ways, you can consider these 17-year cicadas as delightful snacks. Chipmunks, squirrels, birds, snakes, spiders, and even dogs and cats have been seen munching on them. If you have free-range chickens, they will happily scratch up the cicadas and eat them. The cicadas aren't poisonous, although if Fido or Fluffy eats too many, he/she might get sick.

In fact, Dr. Marten Edwards, a biology professor at Muhlenburg College, Allentown, PA, claims that cicadas are an excellent source of protein and are "perfectly tasty." Edwards suggests cooking the locust fresh out of the ground, when it is still white and soft. He adds that "there's less chance it's been affected by insecticide or other toxins."

If you're shuddering from the ick factor at the thought of eating these tasty morsels, the National Pest Management Company suggests that if you have shellfish allergies, you might want to avoid cicadas "because insects are arthropods like shrimp or lobsters" and might make you sick.

So what's the problem with cicadas? And if they're laying eggs in our trees, how do they manage to burst out of the ground years later?

The long answer is that although they don't sting or bite, cicadas every year damage landscape plants. According to pestworld.org, cicadas, much like many other insects, live only for a few weeks.

When the female cuts slits in the bark of pencil-thin branches, she lays about 20 eggs in each slit, for a total of as many as 600 or more eggs. In about six to 10 weeks, the eggs emerge as nymphs, which drop to the ground and burrow, creating tunnels, where they feed on the tree roots and develop for the next three, 10, 13, or 17 years, depending on which brood they are.

Because cicadas have so many beneficial predators, you don't need to use poison spray. Instead, if you have any small trees, net them to prevent cicada damage. Ms. Potter and her Cicada Crew have created a video on how to net small trees to exclude cicadas at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4vjvdfnMM>. Make sure the netting openings are no more than one-half inch so as to prevent cicadas from crawling through and that the net itself is wide and long enough that there will be no openings when it is draped over the tree. Gather the ends around the trunk below all the branches, and use a plastic zip tie to secure them to the trunk. You will want to leave the netting on the tree until about the end of July, or whenever the cicadas have stopped laying eggs.

For more information about gardening, visit <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening>, or call us at 301-600-1596. And don't worry. No monsters here.



The 17-year or periodical cicada is markedly different from the annual cicada. The periodical has an orange-veined, three-inch wide wingspan; is three or more inches in body length; and has big red eyes. The annual cicada has a black and green body. (Photo courtesy of the *University of Maryland Extension Service*.)

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596.

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