

Home/Garden

Summer tradition: Coping with fleas

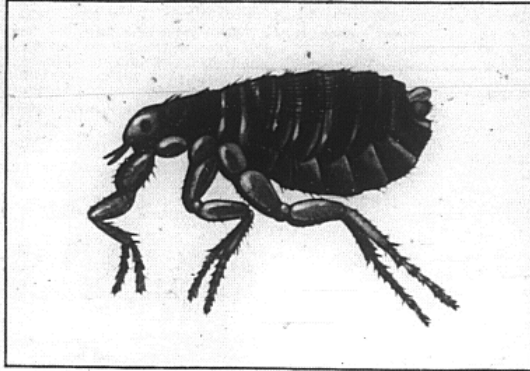
By KAREN IDOINE
Cooperative Extension

The peace of mind and body that a relaxing vacation engenders can crumble when vacationers return home to a house full of voracious, biting fleas. How did they all get there? What can you do about them?

Fleas commonly infest houses at this time of year. In fact, you do not necessarily need to own a pet to have fleas. Although flea outbreaks are likely to occur when cats and dogs have access to the house in summer, fleas can hitch a ride in on people, a friend's pet, or on rodents. One female flea lays a small group of eggs at a time, but will lay hundreds during her life span of approximately 50 to 100 days. The eggs may be laid loosely on animals, but they fall off readily to the floor or ground; otherwise, they are laid directly on the ground, or in floor cracks, rugs and upholstery.

Within two to 14 days, the tiny eggs hatch into small, pale, worm-like larvae, 1/16- to 1/8-inch long. From our perspective, these larvae can live on practically nothing. They feed on the protein-rich feces left behind by their parent generation as well as on minuscule bits of organic matter found in pet bedding, floor cracks, furniture and rugs. The adults feed only on the blood of vertebrate hosts. The fact that the larvae feed in an environment different from that of the adults requires the application of control measures on two fronts.

Depending on temperature and humidity conditions, the larvae develop within a week, or if it's cold, up to several months. When full-grown, the larvae spin cocoons to which debris and dust cling, camouflaging the pupal stage. These pupae generally remain inactive for seven to 14 days, or much longer; vibrations can trigger the emergence of the adults from the cocoon. So, when you come home from vacation, walk into the house and open doors and windows, it's just what the fleas were waiting for. The vibrations signal that a host is nearby. Newly emerged adults



can feed and mate immediately; soon, they begin to lay a new crop of eggs.

A little reflection on the life-cycle of fleas reveals why persistence is the key to eliminating them from your house and pets. Only repeated control measures will result in success.

First, start with your pets since this is the most likely way that your house became infested in the first place. Pets should be excluded from the house until you are sure they are free of fleas. Provide them with clean bedding on a regular basis. You can find flea collars, baths, sprays and powders in retail stores, or at your veterinarian's office. Collars may work better on cats than on dogs; some animals are allergic to these products, so proceed with caution. Flea baths may be a good way of getting rid of a bad infestation on your pet initially, but this should be followed up with powdering or spraying every three-to-five days during the "flea season" of July and August. Oil of pennyroyal is an effective flea repellent, but guidelines for its use are largely anecdotal. As with

all pesticides, read the labels of flea control products and follow directions carefully. Those containing synthetic pyrethrin have relatively low acute mammalian toxicity and limited environmental persistence.

Biological controls for fleas do exist, but may not be readily available in local stores. An insect growth regulator (IGR), called methoprene, is an insect hormone that prevents the larvae from maturing to the adult stage; although it has no direct effect on adults, it will control larval infestations in the house and in pet bedding. D-limonene and linalool are extracts of citrus peel oil that are toxic to cat fleas. Linalool is reported to be more toxic to all stages of cat fleas than is D-limonene, according to a study conducted at Ohio State University recently. Note that the names "methoprene" and "linalool" are the chemical names, not trade names. Read the labels to find out if these chemicals are active ingredients in a product. These biological insecticides are less toxic to vertebrates than the insecticides commonly marketed for flea control on cats and dogs.

After you have taken the first step

of cleaning up the fleas on your pet and its bedding, and excluding animals from the house, tackle your house. Vacuum, sweep and clean thoroughly to remove eggs and larvae from rugs, cracks and crevices. Vacuuming and cleaning need to be persistent, regular and unstinting for several weeks, at least, to remove any new eggs and the larvae which may have escaped your previous cleaning efforts. Dispose of the contents of your vacuum cleaner bag immediately so that fleas can't escape to reinfest your home or yard. Severe infestations in rugs too large to wash, will respond to steam-cleaning. If the adult fleas bite people in the house, a spray or fogging product with pyrethrin or a similar compound will kill the adults.

To successfully control fleas you must kill all adult fleas as they develop, before they blood-feed and lay eggs. The important point to remember is that treatment must be two-pronged, one aimed at the eggs and larvae, and the other at the adults. Chemical treatment must be combined with cleanup; the more thoroughly you clean, the fewer eggs and larvae will develop into adults and the less you will have to rely on extensive spraying or fogging.

After all your work, make sure your house remains free of fleas by monitoring for adults so that you can stop recurrent outbreaks. To monitor, wear white socks and walk slowly across rooms. The fleas will show up on the white socks. Another method is to place a shallow pan or tray of soapy water on the floor with a light shining on it overnight. In the morning, if fleas still inhabit the room, you will find them in the water. The appearance of one flea is enough to warrant continued control measures until monitoring reveals no more fleas. Check for fleas on your pets by combing through the fine hair on their bellies. Flea combs make this process easier. Remember that persistence in cleanup, supplemented by chemical control where necessary, will bring success in dealing with this stubborn pest problem.

We need you.

American Heart Association
WERE FIGHTING FOR YOUR LIFE

HOME OWNERS SAVE \$\$ Money On Aluminum Restoration

1. Enormous savings compared to alternatives
2. Restores aluminum siding back to original color
3. Increase value of your home
4. Looks like new!

FREE ESTIMATE and DEMONSTRATION (802) 257-1757

HYDRO TECH
WASH & WAX CLEANING PAINT PREPS

Stop burning money.

If your current heating system — be it wood, coal, oil or gas — seems to be consuming most of your income, perhaps it's time to look at the Royal Crown. This elegant and practical Swedish ceramic tile wood heater will gently and evenly warm your home with one or two quick fires a day. This is the heater that will pay for itself.

HEARTH WARMERS
"The Masonry Heater Specialists"
RR 1 • Box 27C • Colrain, MA 01340
Mark McKusick • (413) 774-6445

PACKER FARM

Now Picking
Musk Melon, Watermelon, Sweet Corn, Tomatoes, Cucumbers, and Summer Squash.
Canning quantities available.

Greenfield Rd., Montague
5 mins. from Greenfield Center.

SUMMER SALE NOW!

Window Quilt
INSULATING SHADES

STAY COOLER THIS SUMMER

We take pride in offering you the best insulating shade on the market...

RENAISSANCE BUILDERS
(413) 863-8316 • 863-9711

Shade can be made beautiful as well as practical

As scorching week succeeds scorching week, those people whose gardens include a shady corner are enviable. There they can lounge in gently dappled sunlight or an even dimmer shade, catching whatever whisper of a breeze happens by.

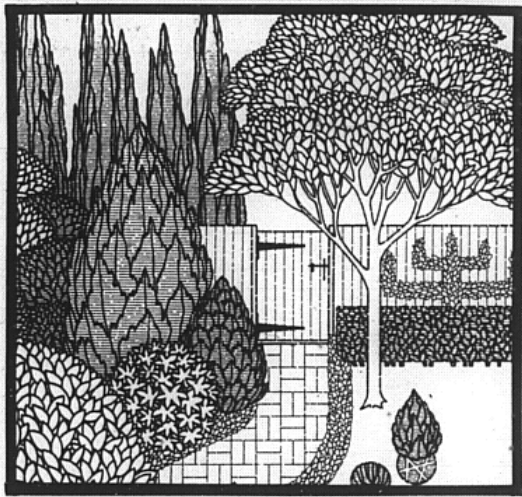
We often curse a shady damp corner and feel limited in our choices about what will grow under these conditions, but during the dog days of summer, such a corner can offer us relief and refreshment. And there are many trees, shrubs, flowers and groundcovers that thrive in the shade.

There is no problem finding flowering plants for the spring shade garden. There are pink and white dogwood trees, rhododendrons of every color, mountain laurels, hardy deciduous azaleas, and countless spring perennials, primroses, lilies of the valley, Virginia bluebells, violas and foxglove.

But it is a little more difficult to find flowering plants for the summer shade garden and it is during the summer that we really cultivate the shade.

Cimicifuga racemosa, snakeroot, is a vigorous and hardy plant that will grow into impressive six-foot-tall clumps with candlebra spikes of white flowers that appear in late July and last well into August. *Cimicifuga* thrives in damp or dry soil.

If your shade garden has water, so much the better. A pool or pond is cooling, but even if you just have soil that remains damp through August, you have perfect growing conditions for astilbes, a large family of perennials. Some dwarf varieties like *A. simplicifolia* "Sprite" and dwarf Chinese astilbe are only 12 inches high. Other varieties are 18 to 30 inches tall and bloom from late June through August. They all have plumy flower stalks in shades of



white, pink, peach and red. In addition to being damp, soil for astilbes should be rich and humusy; dig in compost and rotted manure when setting out plants and fertilize annually in the early spring.

Lobelia is another plant that likes shade and damp. Red cardinal flower, *L. fulgens* "Bee's Flame", grows to four feet with spikes of red flowers and striking deep red foliage. *Lobelia siphilitica* doesn't sound very pretty but it has long lasting blue flowers that begin in August. This blue cardinal flower is more tolerant of dry soil and very hot weather than the red variety.

That good old standby, annual impatiens is perfect for the shady retreat. It is readily available at every

nursery stand in the spring and will bloom in shades of purple, red, pink and white all summer long.

Not all garden color is supplied by flowers. Caladiums with their fancy leaves are often green, but some are red, some with red veining, some pink, and some nearly white with colorful veining or speckles. These grow just as well in pots as they do in the ground, which is good in our climate because these are tender plants. Just remember that any potted plant needs to be kept well watered during the summer.

Caladium bulbs can be started indoors in the early spring then moved outside to a shady location for the summer. After the foliage has been touched by frost, dig up the bulbs and store them in a cool, dry location

until next spring when they can be planted again.

As pretty as flowers and color are, there is something very soothing about the all-green garden at the height of summer. Spring blooming shrubs like the rhododendron and laurel, look very cool with their heavy, shiny foliage. Against this background of shrubbery you can plant hostas. These handsome Yoliage plants come in every shade of green — from a nearly yellow chartreuse to a deep blue-green — and are beautiful and care free. Hostas do produce flowers, but personally I find them so unattractive that I cut the flower stalk off very quickly.

To me the most attractive kind of shade is a light airy shade where the sun might peek through every so often. This is also the kind of shade that is beneficial to the widest range of plants.

You can even have a bit of lawn in this kind of shade and there are special seed mixtures for the shady lawn. Lawns have to be mowed, of course, and there are two schools of thought about the maintenance of the shady lawn. Most people say a shady lawn can remain slightly long, because the greater surface area of long grass stalk is able to collect more sunlight, but others say the grass should be cut frequently and kept short. The short grass stalk will be broader so no surface area is really lost and the lawn will be attractively thick. You'll just have to experiment and find which system works best for you.

Besides shade, attractive plants and a breeze, the shady garden must have a comfortable seat or two. I think some kind of chaise or lounge is best — maybe a hammock. A table for holding a cool drink is vital.

"Killing was right when he said 'Gardens are not made by sitting in the shade...' but some gardens are made for sitting in the shade."

By Pat Leuchtman. This column appears weekly in The Recorder

PERENNIAL WORKSHOPS
series of workshops beginning Aug. 11.
Call for further information.

Continuing a tradition of top-quality plants and generous amounts of well-seasoned garden advice

BAYSTATE PERENNIAL FARM
Rt. 5 & 10, Whately 665-3525
(1/4 mile from Hatfield, Exit 22 N, off I-91)
Open 5 Days 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Closed Mon. & Tues.

FOUR STAR FARMS, INC.
of Northfield is now able to provide turf for all your landscaping needs.

INSTANT LAWN

Forget about wash outs, dust, and spotty coverage from seeding. Have an instant green carpet with 100% Blue-grass turf.

Call (413) 498-2968

Get Lennox's Pulse™ Gas