

4-30-10 Do You Mind if I Dunk?

Now there's a blast from the past. People used to be so polite that they would ask others if it okay to dunk their donut into their own coffee. After all, someone might see it as crude and something better left for when dining alone. I think it dates back to when another behavior was common, that of making do with what you have, such as eating stale donuts. We've become too sophisticated for that now. There's nothing like a recession and being out of work to revive old timer's practices.

The old fashioned method of dealing with pesty insects was to kill them, without any regard for the safety of the method. Most insects are only pests to us humans but are life-giving to nature. Some pests are potentially deadly, though. Mosquitoes and ticks are on the list the vectors of disease and I try my best to avoid or outwit them. They are everywhere in New England and elsewhere around the world and they have earned our attention by bearing such gifts as Lyme Disease and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever from the ticks and Malaria, West Nile virus (WNV) and Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE) from the mosquitoes. Familiarity with these diseases is not necessarily accompanied by accuracy, though.

Why, only last week, I received a call from a woman who was very concerned about her neighbors "renting out" stalls for horses. Her concern was the spread of EEE. I returned her call, thinking this was going to be an easy one. I could tell her that horses, as with humans, are simply victims of EEE, not the cause of it. No matter how many times I said it and even though I read to her a statement from a scientifically reliable source, she held onto her belief that horses spread EEE and, therefore, put her in harm's way.

As she continued to talk about her worries and observations of the neighbors, she did pique my interest. While describing the place as being an eyesore, she listed tires as a recent addition to other junk lying about. Now, that was something I could respond to.

My visit to the address confirmed the tires and other objects capable of holding water. Any container holding water is ideal for breeding mosquitoes. If the containers are not emptied or rinsed, at least every four days, the tiny mosquito larva, resembling miniscule wiggling transparent shrimp, will emerge from their watery habitat as the flying blood sucking pests we know them to be.

Most mosquitoes are just that: a pest. They are more than that, though, when they kill an elderly person by transmitting WNV or when they kill children with EEE. How can we respond appropriately to the potentially deadly effects of a mosquito "bite" and in balance and respect to the rest of nature? How do we not kill the forest to get rid of the one unwanted tree? Getting rid

of horses won't help. Right? We also don't want to harm people, or the water, or the fish and the bees and the birds when we go after the mosquito, right?

In addition to protecting ourselves by avoiding the bite with the long sleeves, repellants, etc, we can safely reduce the local mosquito population with two products. One is affordable. The other may not be. One prevents larval mosquitoes from emerging as flying adults. The other kills the adult mosquito.

The more costly method is to purchase a product known by the trademark, Mosquito Magnet. They range from several hundred dollars and up, use both electricity and propane and require some maintenance, such as emptying bags of dead mosquitoes and refueling. The smallest one covers up to a half acre. They do receive, on the whole, stellar reviews, of catching so many mosquitoes, that after a month of continued use, the local population is reduced to a bare minimum. It produces very advantageous results but at a price unaffordable to many.

A safe and more affordable way to treat the newly hatched eggs, bopping around in their watery habitats wherever Mom hatched the eggs, an unused swimming pool, a catch basin or swamp, is to treat the water body with the larvacide, Bti, or *Bacillus thuringiensis israelensis*. Bti is a naturally occurring soil bacterium registered for control of mosquito larvae by EPA as an insecticide since 1983.

We have to be very careful when reading statements about the level of potential harm or the claimed safety of any chemical. The writer of such documents slips in phrases such as, "does not pose unreasonable risk". What is unreasonable? Also, pay special attention to "when used according to directions" by really using according to directions. There are people in this world who would eat or breathe a chemical and feel entitled to a lawsuit settlement for one of those unreasonable risks even though they are the one who acted unreasonably!

With all that said, even staunch environmentalists have agreed that Bti is safe to use, according to directions, as a method of killing mosquito larvae. Bti is an affordable product that homeowners can buy and apply to that nearby ditch, catch-basin or to the still flooded yards of spring, 2010. It comes in a very handy to use solid form, looking much like a doughnut, called "Dunks". You can buy them online or at your local hardware and big box builder/home supply stores. The cost approximately \$1 each, lasting 30 days and are effective in 100 square feet per each dunk. That's a pretty good bargain. Now, do you mind if I dunk?

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax, MA. For more details on Bti, look up the National Pesticide Information Center (NPIC) or call them at 800-858-7378. To talk to Cathleen about insects or what's bugging you, call 781 585 6418 or write to her at cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us