

The Spraying Spectrum

There has been much confusion this year as to “spraying for mosquitoes”. I guess it is understandable since last year’s aerial spraying of pesticide targeted to reduce adult mosquitoes in Plymouth County had not been performed in almost two decades. The reactions to this State decision were polarized, on the whole. Some people were ecstatic with relief and praise and others were angry and worried that there would be negative consequences from such a wide application of pesticide. This year, some people want this aerial spraying repeated and others are trying to prevent the action or reduce the areas where it can be performed.

What I would like to clarify in people’s minds is the various meanings of “spraying”. The office has received numerous calls with the same question. They ask, “Is the State going to spray again this year?” Or, the caller might say, “I read that the Mosquito Control Program did some aerial spraying and I would like to know if it included my neighborhood because I hope so. The mosquitoes are terrible around my house.”

In response to the second caller, please understand that every spring for decades now, our local mosquito control programs have conducted aerial spraying of a larvicide over swampy areas only. It is not conducted over residential areas. This spraying has been announced in the same way each year, informing Boards of Health. This year, the action was given attention by the media and it created confusion for many people because it sounded like a new thing or perhaps a repeat of last year’s aerial spraying of adulticide.

In response to the first, more often asked question, there is no one answer to that question. “Will the State spray again?” People need to understand that it is not a yes or no, black or white situation.

Imagine a whole spectrum of scenarios. For the sake of discussion, I will stretch that spectrum out a bit. At one end of that spectrum, mosquitoes are only a nuisance. They are annoying but no one ever gets sick from them. They do not carry diseases. No one dies from them. At the other end of the spectrum, most or all or many of these tiny creatures are carriers of deadly diseases. If bitten, people stand a good chance of dying from such illnesses as malaria or Eastern Equine Encephalitis.

Then, there is the rest of the spectrum. Most of us, in most countries and in most years, are not completely spared from concerns of mosquito borne disease and yet, most of the time, we are not in dire fear of every single mosquito, either. And we needn’t be. Every kind of mosquito does not carry disease. Every species of mosquito does not bite mammals. Various mosquito species have different habits and different habitats.

Each year tells a different mosquito story. The temperature, the snowfall, the rainfall, the times of dry periods followed by heavy rain or light rain are just a few of the myriad of weather configurations affecting the outcomes of what species thrive or just barely survive.

Then there are the immunity issues cycling in the animal world. There are years when diseases such as EEE are growing in the birds and being passed back and forth between bug, bird and, finally mammals. (This happens with Lyme disease, too, with mice, deer, tick and people.) With EEE, the birds eventually build immunity to the disease and this helps the disease to decline. Eventually, there will arrive a generation of birds without immunity and the cycle begins again.

These are just a few of the myriad of factors involved in the varying degrees of disease carried by mosquitoes in any given year. I can only understand the bare basics of this complicated issue. I need to listen, to the best of my ability, to entomologists, meteorologists, veterinarians and chemists, to name just a few.

Should we spray pesticides if we have reason to believe that no one will die from disease? No, we should not.

Should we spray if we have reason to believe that human lives will be lost if we don't reduce the mosquito population? Yes, we should but even then, there is so much to decide, as to where, when and what chemical to apply.

We are very fortunate to live in an area with a Mosquito Control Program. I am so glad that there are people out there every week, collecting mosquitoes from traps, separating them by species and sending them off to our State lab for testing.

These collections of insects by species are called a "pool". It is statistical term referring to the group, as in a car pool or a betting pool. It does not refer to a pool of water. Many people have misunderstood this term because many reporters have not explained this or they simply reported that a pool tested positive for EEE or West Nile virus, for instance.

If you want your yard sprayed (ground spraying by truck) by the Mosquito control Program, you can call them at 781 585 5450 or fax them at 781 585 4828.

I cannot tell which individual mosquito is or is not carrying disease. So, it is wise to take precautions. Use repellent and avoid dusk and dawn activities.

I am not any one of the aforementioned experts informing us. So, it wise to listen.

At this point in the spring/summer season, it is too early to tell what lies ahead. So, if you call to ask if we will spray again this year, try to explain what kind of spraying you mean and try to be patient with me if I do not have a simple answer for you.

Be aware. Be informed. I will do the same and will pass along to you whatever I learn.

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