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Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens

by Paul J. Pugliese

“What’s *Bugging* You This Winter?”

Georgia will likely experience a warmer-than-normal and drier-than-normal winter and early spring, according to David Stooksbury, state climatologist at The University of Georgia. If this long-term forecast holds true, then Punxsutawney Phil shouldn’t see his shadow on Groundhog Day this year and mosquitoes will likely return with a vengeance. Whenever we have unusually warm, dry winter days, we also often see some interesting bugs come out in January and late winter.

During those mild, winter days County Extension offices often receive a number of calls and emails from clients who have found tiny flea-like insects by the thousands covering their driveways, sidewalks, or their carports. At first glance, many people assume the colored mass is a mold or fungal growth. But, when they look more closely, they see there are actually thousands upon thousands of tiny (almost alien-like) moving insects. Although the appearance of so many insects can be unnerving, they are harmless. The culprits are strange little creatures called Springtails.

Springtails are normally less than 1/16th inch in length. They are wingless and have very limited vision. Their color can range from yellow to almost purple to green or gray. There are actually about 700 species of springtails in North America. In northern regions, they can appear on the surface of old snow banks and are known by the common name “Snow Fleas.” However, this name is misleading since these aren’t really fleas and they don’t actually bite.

The word “Springtails” sounds like the title of some new Olympic gymnastics event. In fact, these insects are pretty good gymnasts in their own right. They have a specialized structure called a furcula on their abdomen that acts like a tiny spring or catapult. When the furcula is released, the insect jumps into the air traveling a distance of 3 to 4 inches (up to 100 times their body length)!

Because of their small size springtails can quickly dry out, which is why you will usually find them in moist environments. Damp basements, pond edges, and areas of moist leaf litter or mulch are especially attractive to springtails. When ideal moisture and temperature conditions are met, springtail populations may skyrocket. In fact, up to 50,000 springtails can inhabit one cubic foot of topsoil.

These huge numbers can sometimes be found clustering together on rocks, sidewalks, or driveways. They can also be found covering the lower portions of garage doors or house foundations. Springtails feed primarily on dead or decaying vegetation. Other food items include fungi, pollen, algae, and lichens. Springtails help to decompose organic matter and release nutrients back into the soil. For that reason, they are generally considered beneficial and indicators of good soil health.

Of course, if you have a wave of springtails inhabiting your garage they might not seem as beneficial. They seek out these moist locations when their usual habitat becomes uncomfortably dry. When they are found on sidewalks, garage doors, and similar areas, simply wash them off with a water hose. The water will disperse the insects and provide moist conditions in the surrounding soil for them to inhabit. If springtails move indoors, you can simply vacuum or sweep them up. Insecticides are not necessary and do not provide long-term control. Eliminating excess moisture in the home is the best long-term solution.

Fortunately, most springtail infestations last only a few days until rainfall or a change in temperature disperses them. By the time you read this, the conditions for a springtail invasion will probably have passed. Springtails may seem like an alien encounter from another planet, but are just another fascinating part of our natural world.

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