

Halloween isn't the only scary time for bugs

Scary things are happening in our landscapes as we approach Halloween.

The reality of what happens deep down in the darkness of a fire ant mound hidden to human eyes or in the tunnels of a mole cricket where only creepy crawly things dare to enter may be too scary to believe. You've been warned. Continue to read only if you dare.

UF/IFAS and USDA introduced a tiny South American fly to the U.S. to help control the pesky imported fire ant. Literally, these introduced phorid flies cause the imported fire ants' heads to fall off. They then use the decapitated heads to reproduce. The flies hover above the ants, dive in, latch on to the ant's body and inject their eggs. The egg hatches, and a maggot wiggles its way into the ant's head, where it grows for two to three weeks before secreting a chemical that dissolves the membranes holding the ant's body together. In a few hours the ant's head falls off. The maggot eats everything in it and then uses it as a pupae case.

Assassin bugs are frequently seen slowly crawling on shrubs in our landscapes. Most are brown to black but many are brightly colored. A common species is reddish orange in the nymph stage. Assassin bugs feed on many harmful insects. Caterpillars are their favorite food.

They digest their prey before eating it. They do this by piercing their victim with their sharp beak, injecting digestive enzymes. This causes chaos on the unfortunate insect's nervous system and liquefies the internal organs. The liquefied contents are then consumed, leaving only the shell of its kill.

The larra wasp, an introduced predatory insect by UF/IFAS entomologists, enters a mole cricket tunnel. The female wasp will pounce on the mole cricket, wrestle with it and sting it on its soft underside. This immobilizes the mole cricket long enough to allow the wasp to deposit a single egg on its underside. The mole cricket recovers and burrows back into the ground. The wasp larva eventually hatches and slowly eats the mole cricket alive.

We mere mortals should be aware of these horrifying happenings occurring in our own backyards. And we should be frightened by those people who attempt to kill every six-legged critter in sight because they have wrongly identified them as bad. In reality, less than one percent of all the insects that exist are damaging to our plants. Most are of no consequence to our lawns, landscapes or gardens. And many are beneficial. These beneficial insects are helping us gardeners battle the bad bugs during Halloween and year round.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County, October 21, 2008