

The Cicadas Are Coming

by Jessie Keith

YESTERDAY my mother called to say, “You *do* realize that your wedding is scheduled during the 17-year cicada outbreak.” Lucky me. Thankfully, we didn’t decide to have our *whole* wedding outdoors. But—invited or not—the cicadas are coming *en masse*, and in full chorus, so I plan to sit back, smile, offer them cake, and let nature do its thing; I mean, it only happens once every 17 years.

The largest 17-year cicada brood, ominously named Brood X, actually comprises three species: *Magicicada septendecim*, the most common species; *M. cassini*, found in lowlands; and *M. sependecula*, found in highlands. These herbivorous insects, which only occur east of the Rockies, will emerge for four to five weeks from mid-May to early June this year—the final trigger to their emergence is when the soil reaches an optimal temperature of 64 degrees Fahrenheit.

Because this brood emerges in synchrony, the *Magicicadas* reach enormous densities—the most sensational figures being up to 1 million cicadas per acre.

GARDENERS, RELAX

So, what does all this mean for gardeners? Despite the hysterical coverage you may see in newspapers and on television, the answer is: very little. Gardeners eager to protect their woody plants should stop, breathe deeply, and consider this: Established trees and shrubs really don’t need protection from cicada damage, and, besides, there’s little that can be done anyway.

“When you’re dealing with millions of insects at once, what are a few chemicals going to do other than pollute the envi-



Magicicada sependecula, one of three species in Brood X to hatch this summer.

ronment?” says John Cooley, entomologist and research associate at the University of Connecticut. “I don’t advise people to do anything other than protect their most tender and desired woody plants with fine netting,” says Casey Sclar, IPM coordinator at Longwood Gardens. “These cicadas just don’t last for long.”

IT’S A WONDROUS LIFE

In fact, cicadas spend only about 35 out of 6,200 days aboveground, and we can expect to see them only five or six times in our lifetimes, if we’re lucky. “Their emergence should not be taken lightly,” says Richard Karban, a research ento-

For more information about cicadas, visit the University of Connecticut’s Cicada Central Web site: <http://collections2.eeb.uconn.edu/collections/cicadacentral/NA/Magicicada/index.html>.

mologist at the University of California at Davis. “This fantastic phenomenon is part of our natural heritage.”

Cooley concurs. “Seeing these insects should be an amazing spectacle,” he says. “In late spring, a massive synchronized pulse of cicada nymphs will emerge from the ground at night. After five days, most will have matured, and the males will begin singing. Their songs will reach a crescendo after a week and in the second week will subside exponentially. In the final stages, the females will lay their eggs in small tree branches, and, after four to five weeks, nothing will be left but holes in the ground and on flagging twigs.”

Newly hatched cicada nymphs will later drop to the ground and dig below, where they will feed—quite harmlessly—on tree roots for another 17 years, making them the longest-lived insects known in North America.

Cicadas disappear as quickly as they arrive because they are defenseless and readily devoured by other animals, from birds to house pets and even other insects. “Unlike other cicadas, periodic *Magicicada* are ‘predator foolhardy’—meaning they avoid predators inefficiently,” Karban explains. “This may account for why most of their time is spent 18 to 24 inches underground and they mate in synchrony. Smaller 17-year broods emerge in off years, but they don’t get a real chance to reproduce, which suggests there is strong selection for them to emerge *en masse*.”

The emergence of these intriguing creatures is not a problem to dread, but a natural wonder to anticipate. So, whether you are a diligent gardener or a bride-to-be, celebrate the ephemeral cycle of Brood X this summer.

Jessie Keith is editorial intern with The American Gardener.