RIFA-In the Garden

As a Yankee, if I had to name the one thing about the South that I detest the most, I would have to say fire ants! I even remember the first time I was bitten. I was walking through the South Carolina Botanical Garden at Clemson University for one of my classes when I felt this insane itching and burning on my toe. I started freaking out as any normal non-insect person would do. My fellow classmates looked at me a little funny, and then one of my new friends smiled and said, “Welcome to the South, you’ve just been bit by a fire ant!” Well the fire ants have not gone anywhere and neither have I. So I guess we need to learn how to live with them and manage them as well as possible.

This past weekend I was at my mother-in-law’s house building a raised bed garden. Within MINUTES of putting the sterile soil in the raised bed, the fire ants had formed a trail along the side of the wood and were on their way to invade! My husband’s five-year-old niece was happily planting her ‘Mimi’s’ new tomato plants when she was stung. Luckily she is not allergic and it only amounts to another annoying bug bite. But why were the fire ants so quick to inhabit this new area and how can we prevent them from taking residence in our gardens?

Red Imported Fire Ants were introduced from South America into the United States at a port in Mobile, Alabama on a ship where soil was used as ballast. Since that time, the ants have made their way into eleven of the southern states, parts of California, and New Mexico. The United States Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service actually has a quarantine on RIFA. Information about the quarantine can be found here, http://www.aphis.usda.gov/plant_health/plant_pest_info/fireants/index.shtml. RIFA are usually a reddish brown color and can vary in size from 1/8 of an inch to 1/3 of an inch. They are easily identified by their aggressive nature and their irregular mound shape. They usually habituate bright sunny areas and like to form their colonies near flagpoles, fence posts, and cement areas. Any newly disturbed soil is prime real estate for fire ants.

Keeping fire ants out of your yard is one thing, but keeping them out of your garden is a totally different ball game. Most chemical insecticides that you would use in your lawn are not labeled for garden use. It is especially important to make sure you are reading the label carefully and using the insecticides properly because your family is going to consume produce (possibly raw) from the garden. Keeping fire ants out of your garden is a preemptive strategy and there are two basic steps to do so.

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1. Treat the lawn area around your garden three times a year (Spring, summer, and fall) in a 50 to 75 foot swath. Use a bait product and follow all labeled directions. Fewer ants in the lawn will mean fewer ants in the garden.

2. Use a product with spinosad or d-limolene as the active ingredient. These two chemicals are labeled for use in vegetable gardens. Follow all labeled instructions carefully and observe any pre-harvest intervals (time you must wait after application to harvest crops).

Fire ants are here to stay. So, we must learn to manage their populations and keep the hazard to our health and well-being to a minimum. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about fire ants in your garden, or any other horticulture related topic, please contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, by phone at 910-671-3276 or by E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu. For insect alerts and other horticultural news, follow me on Twitter @RoachBuggie. For additional information about North Carolina Cooperative Extension, visit our website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.