

Gifts for the Extension Guy
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For Week of November 2, 2009

Often people bring me gifts that keep on giving. For instance I returned from an out of town meeting only to find a spider and a chinch bug (both in sealed containers) on my desk. Of course there is the occasional bedbug and the cockroach I received in the mail. I even had a man bring in a live snake for identification. I could go on further about the interesting “gifts” I receive but what I really want to do is talk about one specific surprise I had the other day. A very nice lady came to my office and had in her possession a jelly jar. She proceeded to open the jar and hand it to me. I never know what to expect when a jar is handed to me but having seen her open the jar I assumed whatever was in it was dead, I was wrong. After taking the jar I could see very small insects start to fly out of the jar. I didn’t even have much of a chance to get a good look at them.

After asking where she was finding the insects I was able to identify them as fungus gnats. Adult fungus gnats are about 1/8 to 1/10 inch long, grayish to black, have one pair of wings, and look like a tiny mosquito. Fungus gnats do not bite as other gnats do. Larvae are a maggot which is thread like, legless, 1/4 inch long and transparent. These insects are very adapted to living indoors, especially if overwatered houseplants are nearby. They prefer moist, shaded soils high in organic matter, which is what a lot of houseplants have. Adult females can lay up to 300 eggs in batches of 2 to 30 each in decaying organic matter. The eggs will hatch in about five days and the larvae feed for 12 to 14 days and then pupate for 5 or 6 days. Indoors there can be many generations per year.

Most fungus gnat problems indoors are a result of having houseplants that are kept to wet. However, the lady that visited my office indicated that she does not have any houseplants. She said that she has found them in the bathroom concentrated around a broken piece of molding surrounding her bathtub. Fungus gnats will reproduce in drains and other areas where organic matter is available for fungal growth as well as in soil. Larvae feed will feed on soil fungi and will attack root tips of plants. They can cause some damage to otherwise healthy houseplants.

If you notice small black insects hovering around lights, your television, or computer screen you probably have fungus gnats. A few tips to keep these pesky pests in check include; inspecting new houseplants for signs of infestation, allowing houseplant soil to dry between watering, and by practicing good sanitation by removing old plant material and debris around the home. Chemical control methods include using pyrethrins or aerosols labeled for flying insects or gnats. To reduce numbers of larvae without using chemicals try placing slices of potato on the soil surface of houseplants. The larvae will be attracted to the potato and burrow into it. After five days throw the slice away and the larvae will go with it.

For verification of fungus gnats or other questions involving horticulture or household insects feel free to call on me at 605-394-2188 or email to ricky.abrahamson@sdstate.edu. If you bring in sample remember it must be in a sealed container. We are located at 601 E. Centre Street in Rapid City.

Upcoming Events of Interest
(please call for more information)

November 21 – Bulb Forcing Workshop – Rapid City