
SUNNYSIDE THYMES

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"Helping Others Grow"

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Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

SMG Education Committee - Carrie Hunter



Fleas! Fleas have long been a subject of literature from Russian folk tales, to 16th century novels, to poetry. Though the authorship is disputed, there is no doubt that the most famous literary reference to fleas is this short poem:

On the Antiquity of Microbes

Adam/Had'em

Turning our attention to the home gardener, are fleas harmful or beneficial insects? The answer is both. Fleas aren't harmful to landscape and edible plants, but they may be harmful to the gardener and to the gardener's pets. Most home owners and home gardeners interact with small rodents such as squirrels, moles, rats, opossums, etc. These animals are often hosts for fleas at various life-cycle stages, transporting fleas into a homeowner's space and to the homeowner's pets. A flea can jump up to thirteen inches. Fleas carry many diseases-remember the Bubonic Plague!

There are four stages to the flea lifecycle: eggs, larvae, pupae, and adults. The first three stages contain far more individuals than the adult stage. A single adult may lay up to 40 eggs per day. These eggs may take from 2 days to 2 weeks to develop and hatch-with warmer temperatures and higher humidity speeding maturity.

Flea larvae are blind, staying away from light by burrowing into animal fur, clothing, or pet bedding. Larvae feed on flea 'dirt' (feces) and other organic materials (skin flakes, feathers, etc.). After 5-20 days, the larvae begin spinning cocoons, beginning the pupae stage. The cocoon protects the growing flea from 2-5 days before the adult emerges for a meal.

Adult fleas mate after their first meal of organic matter. The female flea will not lay eggs until

after her first blood meal: the flea bite on your ankle, your cat's ear, or your dog's leg. Both humans and animals vary in their reactions to flea bites from minor itching to allergic responses.

Using Integrated Pest Management for flea control is very effective. Brushing and combing pets removes some of the eggs, larvae, pupae and adults. Drop individuals into a cup of soapy water and let set for twenty minutes before flushing down the toilet. Bathing pets and washing bedding, toys, and clothing multiple times is important. Flea cocoons are sticky and vacuuming the carpet multiple times is important for removing newly hatched adults. There are several flea treatments having various mechanisms of action, available either over-the-counter or by prescription. Watch your pet closely, as some pets have severe allergic and/or neurological responses to topical treatments. A consultation with your veterinarian is important. Some have found that mixing Brewer's Yeast, available at health food stores, into your pet's food is effective in repelling fleas.

The use of Diatomaceous Earth (DE), which is 100 percent organic, is another treatment option. Diatomaceous Earth is the finely ground fossils of prehistoric freshwater diatoms. Sprinkle Diatomaceous Earth on infested areas such as pet bedding, upholstery, etc. DE kills insect pests by scarring their exoskeletons and causing dehydration. It should take 48 hours from contact for adult fleas to die. Repeated treatments will be needed as new adults hatch.

Fleas have been pests to humans and to animals for centuries. And by the way, references to fleas in those 16th century novels were euphemisms for sexual activity!
