Yard and Garden –02-05-2011 – Ted Griess/ Extension Horticulture Assistant

While at work, I frequently have a cup of coffee sitting on my desk. While my cup is perched there, I have the rim covered with a piece of paper. Many of my colleagues get a chuckle out of this peculiar sight. At first glance, one might assume I do this to retain the heat in my coffee. Perhaps the paper might offer some small degree of insulating quality, but that is definitely not my reason.

Our Extension office is located on the Buffalo County Fairgrounds. In late summer and early fall, our building is visited by hordes of repulsive, annoying insects belonging to the scientific order *Diptera*. Some experts believe that well over one million species may belong to this order. Many are vectors— those insects that spread assorted diseases to humankind. This large assemblage includes flies, mosquitoes, midges and gnats.

Keep in mind the 4-H livestock pens are located on the fairgrounds and not far from our building. Each year, as autumn approaches, these livestock flies become houseflies, showing up in my office seeking shelter, warmth, and food. Knowing from where these sordid creatures come and how they feed is my prime reason for the paper covering the rim of my coffee cup.

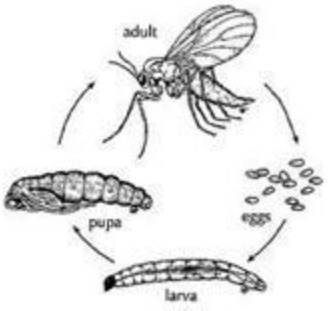
Fortunately, with winter's freezing temperatures now commonplace, these disgusting pests are finally gone (at least for now). However, I am now noticing another member of the order *Diptera* making its début. At this very moment, one of these minuscule critters came fluttering by. Ironically, over the past few days I have also received a number of calls from homeowners who are experiencing these same tiny pests.

If you are noticing very small (1/8" long), black, mosquito/fly-like creatures buzzing about, you, too, may be troubled. Winter is the perfect time for these pests to appear. People often confuse them with fruit flies. Although fruit flies could be the culprit, especially if fruit is openly lying about the home, fruit flies easily distinguish themselves; they are not black. In addition, fruit flies have conspicuous red eyes. More than likely, the new, unwelcome guests are fungus gnats.

Fortunately, fungus gnats do not bite. They do not spread disease, but they are annoying.

As with most members of the order *Diptera*, destroying the food source eliminates the pest. Your question may be, "What is the food source of a fungus gnat?" The answer is simple. These gnats are coming from your houseplants.

Relax. Although effective, I am not recommending you destroy your houseplants. Rather, how you care for them is the answer. These annoying pests thrive in wet, rotting, potting soil. An adult fungus gnat lays her eggs in the wet soil. The eggs quickly hatch into tiny larvae (mini-maggots) feeding on the rotting organic matter. Within two to three weeks, the eggs pupate, soon emerge as adults, and repeat the cycle.



Detecting the source is your first step. **Closely** examine the soil's surface of your potted plants. Those plants infected will reveal adult gnats crawling about.

Allowing the soil to dry between watering is an effective management control. Repotting with new potting soil is another useful remedy. After you have adjusted your watering practices, should heavy infestations persist, you may need to resort to insecticides. Pyrethroid-based chemicals with extended persistence yield the best results. Always check the labels to see what pests they control and diligently follow the directions.

I now need to do some detective work. It is time I carefully examine all the potted plants in our office. One good thing — I no longer need to cover my coffee cup.