



Spotlight on: Cicadas

You may have heard that the 17-year cicadas are due this year. In Pittsburgh, we likely won't see the swarms of cicadas that are surfacing in the eastern part of the state. The 17-year cicadas in our area are on a different cycle than those out east. The northern areas of our region will see large populations of the insects in 2019, and the more southern areas will be inundated in 2016. But we thought this would be a good time to learn more about this interesting species. Many gardeners are wondering whether these loud harbingers of summer should be considered friend or foe! Read on for more information about the 17-year cicada's life cycle.

Life Cycle

There are many different types of cicadas. Some of them take an extremely long time to develop into adults – like 13 or 17 years!

- When the cicadas are almost mature, they emerge from ½” holes in the earth, to molt (lose their outer skin). Immediately after the molting process they may look white, but soon darken to their final coloration of black, with orange wing veins. The 17-year cicada's eyes are red!
- After 4-6 days, the cicada reaches adulthood. At this point, the males begin their familiar loud, raspy song, in order to attract mates. Each species of cicada has its own specific song.
- Once the females are fertilized, they lay egg nests in the tips of branches of trees or shrubs. One female lays around 20 eggs per nest and can lay up to 400 eggs total!
- After 6-10 weeks, the eggs hatch and nymphs drop to the ground. They burrow into the earth and find a root that will feed them for the next 17 years! By the time the nymphs hatch, the adults have died.

Geographical Range

The periodical cicadas are found only in North America, and the 17-year variety in particular lives only in the northern region. Remarkably, in any given location, the cicadas' date of emergence barely varies from generation to generation. In general, cicadas emerge between May and June. Some areas report from tens to hundreds of thousand cicadas per acre! On a garden-sized scale, that can be anywhere from 25-100/square yard. As we mentioned, cicadas are expected to make a major appearance in eastern PA this year but cicada numbers in the Pittsburgh area should be normal.

Cicadas in the Garden

Although cicadas can do some damage to shrubs and trees, in general they are considered benign or even helpful in the garden.

It is good to know that cicadas:

- Do not sting or bite.
- Do not carry disease.

- Are not poisonous.
- May make a loud buzzing sound when picked up, as they attempt to fly away.

Cicadas do not feed on herbaceous garden plants, but they may make a lot of visible damage on trees and shrubs. Young woody plants (like blueberries, fruit and nut trees, shrubs and bushes) may be severely damaged by the cicadas, when they lay their eggs in the tips of the branches. However, most large established trees and shrubs make a good comeback after the cicadas are gone, even if the damage at first appears to be severe. “Tip pruning,” which happens with cicada egg-laying, can be a natural way to increase growth the following year. For young or small trees and shrubs, the best plan is to exclude the cicadas with netting or gardener’s row cover. For more information, please see [this article](#).

Here are some of the benefits of cicadas to the garden:

- Holes in the ground (from emerging cicadas) increase aeration and water absorption in the soil.
- Cicadas that are “past their prime” make a great fertilizer! (No joke – add some to your compost pile!)
- Egg-laying in the ends of branches gives your plants a natural (and effort-free, on your part) pruning.

The 17-year cicada is a unique aspect of life in our region. In a few years we’ll get a chance to protect any small shrubs or trees in our gardens or yards then enjoy the sights and sounds of the cicada invasion! It only comes around so often.