

Protect Yourself from Ticks

By Susan Camp

Springtime on the Middle Peninsula is when we return to our gardens in earnest: planting, pruning, weeding, and removing winters bedraggled detritus. It is also the time when ticks increase their activity; but make no mistake, ticks are present year-round as long as the temperature is above freezing, so we are never truly free from their grasp.

At this moment, ticks are hanging onto leaves and blades of grass in your yard and mine, waiting for an unsuspecting pet or human to pass by. Ticks hang on to surfaces with their back legs, leaving their front legs free to hitch a ride on the shoes or clothing of anyone who brushes against the leaves or grass. Ticks don't stalk you or lie in wait for you to pass; they don't jump like fleas, or fly, and they don't drop from trees. They are opportunistic rather than deliberate predators.

Ticks are not insects; they are arachnids, related to spiders and mites, but unlike those creatures, ticks are blood-sucking parasites that require three blood meals during their four-stage lifecycle of egg, larva, nymph, and adult. Right now, you are probably asking yourself, "Do I really need to know this information?"

You really do, because if all a tick did was bite you and leave an itchy, red spot, we could leave this topic behind and focus on the flowers blooming in the garden this week. The sad truth is that ticks carry a variety of serious, sometimes lethal diseases that have unpleasant symptoms and long-lasting effects.

Lyme disease is caused by bacteria carried by black-legged ticks (formerly deer ticks). Tick larvae become infected by feeding on rodents, especially white-footed mice. As the larvae grow into nymphs, they will attach to and infect humans. Adult ticks feed on deer rather than rodents, but if they are infected, they will transmit the disease to people, too.

Lone-star ticks, so-called because of the white spot on the backs of adult females, are common in Coastal and Piedmont Virginia. Lone star ticks carry bacteria that cause two lesser known serious and potentially deadly diseases: ehrlichiosis and anaplasmosis. Lone star ticks also cause some less common diseases, including Southern tick-associated rash illness (STARI) and alpha-gal syndrome (AGS), which causes a severe allergy to red meat.

American dog ticks, which carry the organism that causes Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (RMSF), and Asian longhorned ticks are found primarily in the western and northern regions of Virginia.

Ticks live in our yards, gardens, fields, and wooded areas, so we must remain diligent all year to prevent tick bites to humans and pets. Tick prevention recommendations from the Virginia Department of Health and the VCE Publication 1396-2906 (Ento-487NP) include keeping weeds mown, underbrush thinned, and leaf piles removed. Since small rodents are the primary carriers

of ticks, try to rodent-proof nesting sites like stone walls and woodpiles. Place bird feeders away from your house, deck, or patio, and clean up birdseed that has fallen to the ground to further discourage rodents. Adult ticks feed on deer, so spray your azaleas and daylilies with smelly deer repellent to keep them out of the garden.

To protect yourself from tick bites, walk on trails instead of through tall grass. Wear light-colored, long-sleeved shirts and long pants so crawling ticks are visible. Tuck your pant legs into your socks. Wear a hat. You can purchase clothing treated with permethrin, an insecticide. Permethrin aerosol spray also is available, but it is highly toxic to bees.

Informative articles include VCE Publications ENTO-504NP “Tick-Borne Diseases in Virginia” and the CDC website page “Preventing Tick Bites.” Both publications cover specific tick-borne diseases and helpful methods to decrease tick populations on your property.