

TICKED OFF



Bonnie Courter
Master Gardener

QUESTION: I've never seen so many ticks as I have this year! I check my dogs daily and find multiple ticks on them and sometimes on my own body.

I'd like to know more about them and what can gardeners do to protect themselves from the dreaded Lyme disease they sometimes carry.

ANSWER: Due to our mild and wet winter, this can cause an uptick (no pun intended) in the tick population.

Ticks are arthropods, close relatives of mites, spiders and scorpions. They feed on the blood of humans, animals, birds and reptiles and thrive on humidity. The warmer and moister an environment becomes, the faster their life cycle is completed, thus increasing their numbers throughout the season.

There are many species of ticks, but in Oregon only a few feed on humans or pets: the American dog tick, the Pacific Coast tick, the Rocky Mountain wood tick and – the most prevalent – the western blacklegged tick, formerly known as the deer tick.

The life cycle of the tick consists of egg, larva, nymph and adult. The larva stage has six legs, while nymphs and adults have eight.

Immature and adult ticks will mostly be encountered in woody, brushy areas or where there is tall grass. They locate their hosts by questing – climbing up to the tips of vegetation and extending their front legs out, away from their bodies, holding on using their other legs.

To avoid drying out, they often return to the base of the plants to stay hydrated several times during the day. When a potential host passes by, the tick will grab on using the hooks attached to its front legs and immediately travel to a spot to begin feeding.

Instead of a true head, ticks have only projecting mouthparts coming out from the front edge of their body. These mouthparts are used to identify the different tick species. To feed, the tick will use these mouthparts to cut a small hole in the skin of its host, then insert them into the tissue to lap up the host's blood.

Male ticks take in only small amounts of blood when feeding

since they have a hard plate that covers the entire top surface of their body. However, the female's plate only covers 1/3 of the front part of their body, allowing them to swell greatly, stretching their bodies like a balloon as they take in large amounts of blood.

Once fully swollen, she will drop to the ground, and if mating took place, she will then lay her eggs in the soil.

Though irritating and sometimes painful, tick bites are a cause of greater concern because of their ability to transmit diseases like Lyme disease. Ticks need to be attached and feeding to transmit this disease. Cases of Lyme disease from tick bites in Oregon are very rare, however.

Lyme disease is caused by a bacteria and was discovered in Old Lyme, Connecticut, in the early 1970's. In the western US, Lyme disease is most often transmitted by the western blacklegged tick, *Ixodes pacificus*, but recent data shows only 3-8% of these ticks in Oregon carry the Lyme bacterium.

Symptoms of Lyme disease will show up within 2-30 days of an infectious tick bite, resulting in fever, fatigue, headache, aching joints, nausea and a small red bump at the bite site which can enlarge into a red-ringed rash. If caught early, it responds well to antibiotics.



GRIFFIN DILL/UNIVERSITY OF MAINE
A western blacklegged tick adult compared to a nymph. This particular arthropod was formerly known as the deer tick.



Ticks thrive on humidity. The warmer and moister an environment becomes, the faster their life cycle is completed, thus increasing their numbers throughout the season.

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Avoid ticks if possible by staying away from brushy, grassy areas that may be good habitat for ticks. When working or hiking in these areas, wear long-sleeved shirts and tuck pants into your socks, wearing closed-toe shoes. Light-colored clothing will help spot any ticks.

Ticks in your yard can be reduced by keeping your landscape free of leaf litter, keeping grass mowed and brush cleared off. Keep deer and other wildlife away if possible. Check yourself and your pets daily, and shower after walking through such areas.

Should you find an attached tick on yourself or your pet, prompt removal will reduce any infection dramatically. The probability of disease transmission increases the

longer a tick is attached and feeding.

The proper way to remove a tick is to grasp the tick at the front of the body with a strong set of tweezers or forceps and as close to the surface of the skin as you can. Slowly, forcefully pull the tick straight out from the body. A feeding, embedded tick is unable to release itself from its host voluntarily until it's fully engorged, so using a gentle but firm pull is the way to safely disengage the tick so you don't leave its mouthparts embedded in the skin.

Be careful not to twist or jerk the tick, and do not squeeze or crush its body as its fluids may also be infective. Once the tick is removed, apply an antiseptic to the bite site and dispose of the tick by either placing it in a container of alcohol or flushing down a toilet.

If you have suffered a tick bite and are concerned about contacting a disease, it's a good idea to place the tick in a container of isopropyl alcohol, just enough to cover the tick or put it in a sealed bag and freeze it. Then take it in to the OSU Extension Office plant clinic or to your medical provider for identification.



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Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 S E Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the Oregon State University Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.