

Invasion of the killer wasps?



Gardening help-line dispenses free advice, answers your questions

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FREEHOLD BUREAU

Richard Obal (right) looks at galls, or tumor-like growths, from an oak, which was brought in by Lynn Strzelecki of Millstone (left). Bottom left, Diane Zahorsky, Shelia Eppinger and Tina Woodward research a type of oak tree that has galls. Below right, wilted leaves from a pear tree that was brought to the Master Gardeners. Dave May - photo

Around 9 a.m. Monday, as volunteers began staffing the Monmouth County gardening help-line, Tina Woodward was on the telephone, giving free advice.

"They look much more intimidating than they are," said Woodward, 35, having already completed 60 hours of classroom time and now wrapping up her 60 hours of volunteer time to be certified as a master gardener.

Woodward was dispensing advice on cicada killer wasps, generally passive to humans, preferring to sting cicadas.

So the advice of the Master Gardeners program, run by the Rutgers University Cooperative Extension in cooperation with county government, was cicada killer wasps are generally harmless and will be active only a few more weeks.

The help-line office is staffed year-round, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekdays, at the Cooperative Extension's Freehold Township office. Beside direct telephone calls or responding to voice mails, the volunteers also answer e-mails and letters, along with assisting walk-ins.

Bob Mellert, 69, a Marlboro resident who has volunteered at the help-line for five years, checked an e-mail inquiry seeking to identify a pest eating eggplants.

"Sheila, can I borrow you for a minute?" Mellert said to fellow volunteer Sheila Eppinger of Brielle. "Do you recognize that guy?"

Eppinger, a retired psychotherapist and a master gardener since 1998, was looking at the photograph of the eggplant-eating beetle, which was attached to the e-mail sent by Nick LoCastro, 16, of Wall.

"Someone brought that (a specimen) in a few weeks ago," Eppinger said.

Eppinger, Mellert and Woodward, the three volunteers staffing the help-line for the first 3 1/2-hour shift, searched for the beetle's identity in printed references.

"That's the fun," said Mellert, a philosophy professor at Brookdale Community College.

Fifteen minutes after the search began, Eppinger announced, "Here we go, it's the larva stage of the (Colorado) potato beetle."

Mellert e-mailed the identification and solution back to LoCastro - hand-pick off the beetle and its eggs or, in a severe case, use a pesticide.

"It was probably what I was looking for, (to) make sure it wasn't a serious problem," said LoCastro, speaking of the answer he received "Just him telling me that hand-picking was sufficient enough was the answer I was looking for."

That is because LoCastro's garden is organic, one not using pesticides. LoCastro found the help-line through an Internet search he and his mother, Rose, did.

With the help-line not staffed over weekends while the gardeners are out and about, Mondays are usually the busiest days. And this past Monday was the day after the closing of the Monmouth County Fair, where visitors generated questions.

Of 22 inquiries the three volunteers received, 11 were by telephone, six by e-mail, three by walk-in, one by letter and one by a visitor to the fair.

Besides inquiries about cicada killer wasps and Colorado potato beetles, others asked about dying Norway spruce (the person was sent a list of tree experts), cedar apple rust (a fact sheet and spraying schedule was provided), oak gall (basically, there is no control, other than clipping off the affected branches) and so on.

"They don't have to have all the answers," Zahorsky said. "They should know where to find the answers."

Resources include guide books and fact sheets. A microscope provides a better look at specimens, and soil-testing kits await samples.

"It's always interesting," Mellert said. "I learn every time I come here."

At one point, after Woodward, a Holmdel homemaker, hung up the telephone, she said, "It's the question of the day."

"Cicada killers?" Mellert asked.

Woodward - now into the her second cicada killer wasp inquiry and, therefore, becoming the shift's go-to person on these pests - basically told the caller to let the problem take care of itself.

"They are not harmful, although they look like they could carry you away," Woodward said. "They are not aggressive.

"You could put Sevin down," Woodward told the caller, referring to a common pesticide, "but you have a dog. That's not suggested."

At mid-morning, Donna Leonardo, 50, of Colts Neck walked up to the counter, carrying a dwarf pear tree's branches with dying leaves.

"It's very important to me, it was planted in memory of my mother last year," Leonardo said. "So I really don't want it to die.

"She liked pears, so my husband planted it," Leonardo said.



Diane Zahorsky

Zahorsky identified the culprit as fire blight, a weather-related bacteria. Zahorsky recommended pruning the dead ends and watering enough to keep the tree out of drought stress.

"I don't think it's going to die," Zahorsky said.

Zahorsky said samples, whether brought in or sent in, are more helpful because the gardeners can inspect them.

During a lull, Woodward began dealing with 44 requests from county fair visitors. They sought information on poison ivy; dealing with voles, bagworms and carpenter bees; and how to grow peonies from seed; and so on.

David Skirkanich, 46, was visiting his brother Peter's house in Rumson.

"We came across all these giant, swarming wasps that were in his backyard," said Skirkanich of Milford, Conn. "I knew they were wasps, but I never saw wasps that were about an inch-and-a-quarter-long. And they appeared overnight."

So he called the help-line. That was a job for Woodward, de facto expert on killer cicada wasps.

"They look more intimidating than they are," Woodward told Skirkanich. "They, actually, are controlling the cicadas."

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