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Mission: Mosquito

Attack summer's enemies with a battle plan

07/11/2003

By HELEN BOND / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

We never liked them, but we put up with them – as unwanted guests at elegant outdoor parties, as nuisances at baseball games and barbecues.

Mosquitoes are still as annoying as ever. And with the arrival of West Nile virus in North Texas, they turned deadly.

You can fight back with an arsenal of common sense, preventive strikes and weapons of mass destruction, both organic and chemical.

Fire up the artillery.

It's time to charge.

FIGHTING MACHINES

Residential, nontoxic, high-tech traps, developed originally for surveillance purposes, are emerging as the most reliable in the higher-end category. Most emit a fatal humanlike combination of heat, carbon dioxide and the chemical attractant octenol that lures the insects into a trap, where they dehydrate and die. \$200 to \$1,300.

NAME, RANK, SERIAL NUMBERS

Mosquito Magnet: Big daddy in the vacuum category, made by American Biophysics Corp. (1-877-699-8727, www.mosquito magnet.com). Two models: Pro (\$1,295), for entire yards, and Liberty (\$495), for smaller areas such as courtyards.

Lentek Mosquito Trap (\$400, 1-888-353-6835) and Applica SonicWeb ICH500 (\$199.80, www.sonicweb.com, 1-800-390-6286) received

My newsletters

high marks from Consumer Reports' May 2003 issue.

REPORT FROM THE FIELD

Dr. Dan Kline of Gainesville, Fla., a research entomologist with the U.S.

Department of Agriculture who has conducted studies on the development and effectiveness of traps and attractants, found the Mosquito Magnet's Pro version performed best, while Consumer Reports rated the Liberty as having the "best combination of performance and convenience."

Dr. Kline warns that it is unresolved whether the presence of only one trap on the block – even if it's in your back yard – will provide any real protection.

Dr. Ray Parsons, director of mosquito control for Harris County, says these traps work and don't harm benign insects as zappers do, but they shouldn't be the only defense in the war against mosquitoes.

LOW-TECH STEALTH FIGHTERS

There are plenty of low-cost products (under \$10 per application) on the market that purport to set up a close-range barrier around humans, divert the pests or lure them into a fatal trap. Are they effective? Maybe yes, maybe no.

CHEMICAL WARFARE

Traps and deterrents such as hanging lanterns, coils, candles and other devices contain a variety of repellents.

Experts are generally dismissive, saying they work only in a confined space and not if it's windy.

Backyard foggers, such as Cutter Bug Free Backyard Outdoor Fogger, can help create a barrier around a specific area of the back yard. Use an hour before serving food. Remember, it's only a temporary fix.

Mosquito control granules, such as larvicide Pre-Strike (www.wellmarkinternational.com), use the insect-growth regulator Methoprene to control mosquito larvae in standing water for up to 21 days.

BIOLOGICAL WARFARE

Doughnut-shaped briquettes with the active ingredient *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt), which kills mosquitoes in their larval stage, is marketed under brand names such as Aquabac, Vectobac and Mosquito Dunks. The EPA rates it generally safe for pets, wildlife and humans. Available at most garden centers that sell organic supplies.

Granular products, such as Dr. T's Nature Products Mosquito and Gnat

Repellent, made with plant oils (www.animalrepellents.com) are broadcast on lawns and in flowerbeds. The pungent oils, redolent of garlic, are said to repel the biting insects.

Gambusia, commonly known as mosquito fish, are sold at water garden nurseries. The city of Dallas introduces the voracious and prolific fish to slow-moving and stagnant streams, creeks and ponds to eradicate mosquito larvae. They are suitable for backyard ponds and water features that are too shallow for ornamental fish.

Air strike: There's nothing like a stiff breeze to keep mosquitoes at bay. Set up an electric fan where you want to be working, playing or dining.

MIST CAMPAIGN

Expect to see more mosquito misting systems installed by companies such as MosquitoNix and ABC Pest Control.

NAME, RANK, SERIAL NUMBER

MosquitoNix (starting at \$2,900) pumps pyrethrin (an insecticide derived from a plant extract) through a yard's installed line. A fine mist is released three to four times a day in 20- to 60-second intervals, says Steve Jenkins, chief executive officer of Dallas-based MosquitoNix. Other mist and fogging systems use pyrethroids, synthetic chemical pesticides.

CedarCide Industries (www.cedarcide.com), a line of chemical-free products, is rated by the EPA as a minimum-risk pesticide. Its Houston-area manufacturer says it can be used in misting, fogging and sprinkler systems without harm to people or wildlife.

REPORT FROM THE FIELD

Mike Merchant, urban entomologist with Texas Cooperative Extension, says he is reluctant to recommend systems that emit pyrethrin and pyrethroids because they kill beneficial insects such as honeybees, butterflies, dragonflies and ladybugs. They also are toxic to fish and tadpoles in backyard ponds.

The National Pesticide Telecommunications Network reports that exposure to pyrethroids can cause skin or respiratory reactions in people with a history of those conditions.

The EPA reports that pyrethroids, when applied according to the label, "do not pose unreasonable risks to human health."

THE REINFORCEMENTS

You can't get West Nile virus if mosquitoes don't bite you, so use a repellent.

CHEMICAL WARFARE

With DEET: Consumer Reports testers recently gave top ratings to 3M's Ultrathon (33 percent DEET) and Off! Deep Woods for Sportsmen (100 percent DEET). Don't use on children.

Tip: Apply only to exposed skin. Wash skin thoroughly when returning indoors.

BIOLOGICAL WARFARE

Without DEET: Just as mosquito-killing machines are proliferating, so are chemical-free products to spray on skin, beyond the time-tested natural favorite, citronella. Products include Avon Skin So Soft Bug Guard Plus IR3535 (www.avon.com), Repel Lemon Eucalyptus, Bite Blocker for Kids (www.biteblocker.com), Fite Bite Plant-Based Insect Repellent (www.travmed.com), Off! Botanicals Insect Repellent.

Tip: Reapply DEET-free products more frequently, according to product label. They're generally effective for only 30 to 45 minutes.

REPORT FROM THE FIELD

The American Academy of Pediatrics (www.aap.org) recommends DEET concentrations of 10 percent or less on children older than 2 months. Never apply DEET products to children's faces and hands.

The American College of Physicians recommends concentrations of 10 to 35 percent DEET for adult use. A higher percentage of DEET does not mean that protection is better, only that it will last longer. Products with 100 percent DEET, studies show, give about two hours more protection than products with 50 percent. It is better to reapply the repellent than to use a higher concentration.

HOMELAND SECURITY

Eliminate standing water, including pet dishes, pool covers, tire swings, trashcans and flowerpot saucers.

Clean debris from rain gutters, tree holes, tarps and plastic sheeting.

Drain and refill birdbaths, pet bowls and wading pools every two to three days.

Keep swimming pools chlorinated properly.

Repair leaky outside faucets, pipes and air-conditioning units.

KNOW THE ENEMY

Only female mosquitoes bite. They need the extra boost of protein in blood to reproduce.

Standing water invites mosquitoes. The insects deposit eggs, as many as 300 at a time, in standing water. The eggs turn into larvae, the filament-thin creatures you can see wiggling in birdbaths, clay saucers or toy buckets.

Mosquitoes don't fly far from where they breed. The ones that attack you most likely were hatched on your property or a neighbor's.

West Nile virus, harbored in birds, is spread by mosquitoes to people and horses. West Nile encephalitis is inflammation of the brain caused by the virus. Most people infected with West Nile will develop no symptoms.

The risk of severe illness and death is highest for people older than 50.

Dallas and other North Texas cities continue to ask residents to report dead blue jays and crows found on their property. For the latest information about Dallas' mosquito control, call the hotline at 214-670-1733. To report dead crows and blue jays and potential breeding sites in other localities, call your municipal environmental health department.

Mosquitoes see, feel and hear you. Don't be a moving target.

Mosquitoes can bite through tight-fitting clothes. Opt for light-colored, loose-fitting styles that cover as much of your skin as comfort allows.

Save perfumes and aftershaves for your next cocktail party.

Avoid the outdoors around dawn and sunset, peak biting times.

SOURCES: *Texas Cooperative Extension, U.S. Department of Agriculture, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, American Academy of Pediatrics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency*

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