

TICK PREVENTION TIPS

By Craig Hollingsworth, UMass Extension Entomologist

There are several strategies for protecting oneself from ticks and for reducing deer tick population in the landscape. Here are a few additional things to consider as you address the tick populations in your lawn.

Fortunately, lawns are not the desired resting area for ticks. While the occasional tick may fall off of a bird, mouse, deer or other host while they are on a lawn, they aren't commonly found on groomed surfaces. Adult ticks prefer tall brush or weeds that maintain a humid environment where they can climb up on to await the passage of warm-blooded prey (like us!). The immature nymphs like to hang out in mulch and leaf litter, where they can attach themselves to mice and voles.

It's a lot easier to prevent tick problems than to have to try and deal with them after somebody says 'hey – what's that in your ear?' A lot of the information that follows comes from data collected by the Bio-Integral Resource Center for the *Special Pathogen Issue* of their excellent journal, *Common Sense Pest Control*. You'll find more info at www.BIRC.org.

1. Pay attention to timing and location.

The risk of picking up a deer tick is worst in the morning and late afternoon; they don't like to 'hunt' in the heat of the day. They also prefer southern exposures, being uphill and areas where brush meets grasslands.

2. Rake up, shred and compost your fall leaves.

Infected nymphs – the nasty 'little ticks' that are hardest to detect – love to live in leaf litter. In a study conducted in New York State over a three-year span, cleaning up leaves reduced tick numbers by 48-87%.

3. Let the sunshine in

Pruning trees in the winter to increase the amount of sunlight that gets through below in the summer will help your plants and keep tick numbers low, as they prefer the high humidity of damp shady areas.

4. Water wisely.

We've been advising people for years to avoid excessive, frequent watering for the good of their plants. Here's another reason; areas allowed to dry out between waterings are much less attractive to ticks.

5. Keep brush and grassy areas near the landscape mowed. In one study, mowing reduced the number of ticks by 70%.
6. Discourage rodents and other small mammals.

Yes, deer DO carry deer ticks and it's always a good idea to keep deer out of the landscape. But deer ticks don't become infected from them and many disease-carrying ticks never meet a deer. Most deer ticks do spend lots of time on mice and voles and it's those creatures that pass on the organisms that allow the ticks to transmit conditions like Lyme disease, anaplasmosis and babesiosis. Voles and mice love the protection from predators that a heavy layer of wood, bark or root mulch affords. Composting is an alternative to mulch where ticks are a problem; compost will prevent weeds, feed the plants and rodents don't care for it.

7. Keep bird feeders away from the house. Birds can carry ticks and spilled seed attracts lots of potentially tick-carrying rodents.
8. Consider wearing dedicated shirts, pants and socks sprayed with tick repellent when you head outside.

The two best options for tick repellent are permethrin and DEET. Permethrin, the most effective, is a pesticide and actually kills ticks, though in small quantities will repel them. Permethrin as a 0.5% (one half of one percent) pump spray or aerosol can be found in stores that sell camping and hunting supplies. Brand names include Duranon™ and Permanone™. These are only to be used on clothing (spray them on your clothes, not your skin) and will retain their activity through up to five laundry cycles. Products that contain DEET are another alternative. DEET is formulated to be applied to skin but there can be some absorption through the skin so it is a good idea to minimize skin contact.

Adult deer ticks are tiny =- approximately the size of a sesame seed. Males are black; females have a brick-red abdomen and a black shield near the head. Females swell to 1/4mm when fully engorged after feeding. Adults are found primarily from September through November and again in March and April. Adults feed mainly on deer but will also attack cattle, horses, dogs, etc. Humans are accidental hosts.

From MNL/Pro Grow News. Sources: Garden Clippings (volume 30, Number 8) October 2010.