Spring can drive you buggy

NEWARK, DE — Spring is the season when honeybees, ants, termites and many other social insects divide themselves to form new colonies. Exactly what triggers the swarming process is not known, but when people see it happening, they often panic. This is understandable, since a swarm may contain several thousand insects. One's first reaction may be to destroy them instantly.

However, the situation is rarely that urgent, says University of Delaware extension agricultural agent Derby Walker. The first step is to assess the problem.

"Carpenter ants and termite swarms inside a house often indicate the presence of a colony," he says. "These insects are short flyers so in this case it's best to destroy the winged insects with an approved household insect spray and then inspect the house to find out if you have more. If you cannot do the inspection yourself, call a reputable pest control operator (PCO)."

If the PCO finds an infestation, get a written estimate of the work recommended before having any done. Walker also advises calling two other PCOs for written estimates. Ask each company or operator for references and PCO license number to be sure they are registered.

"Even if there is an infestation, don't panic and accept the first bid that's made," the agent says. "Both termites and carpenter ants work slowly. So take your time and select the best offer. The best deal is not necessarily the cheapest or the most expensive. Read the written estimates of what each PCO will do for you, then make your decision. It would be smart to check some of their references, too."

Honeybee swarms are a different matter. "These insects are quite gentle when they first swarm," says Walker–himself a beekeeper. "As long as they're not disturbed, they won't bother you. The bees in the new cluster gorged themselves with honey before leaving their old colony to establish a new one. Since they're fat with honey, they're not likely to sting unless they've been hanging in a bush or tree for several days and have depleted this food supply. Generally, though, the swarm finds a new home long before this happens. It may choose an abandoned building, hollow tree, chimney or some other cavity."

According to Walker, most beekeepers are interested in picking up swarms which are easy to reach, since this is a good way to increase the number of colonies they manage. "If you see a honeybee swarm this spring," he advises, "call your county extension office or check the local newspapers for listings of beekeepers who will pick up bees."

Honeybees are valuable insects and should not be destroyed, Walker concludes. They pollinate many fruits and vegetables, provide beeswax, honey and even glue.

"If you happen to see a swarm, don't panic," he says. "Just keep children away, make a few phone calls, and in a short time your swarm should either be picked up by a beekeeper or will leave of its own accord. There's no reason to get out a spray can or call someone to destroy them."

Check plant

Before taking that planter to the field this spring, examine it carefully to be sure it's in good working order.

"Improper planting can cause costly production problems," warns University of Delaware extension county agricultural agent Derby Walker. "It's extremely difficult to correct planting errors later because it's hard to thicken up a stand without damaging existing plants."

If plants are weak because seed went in too deep or stands are thin, yields can be greatly reduced. Poorly planted crops tend to be weaker and are more susceptible to chemical injury, insect damage and disease, he says.

After checking the planter to make sure all the parts are there and in working order, calibrate it. Know how deep each row is planting and how many seeds per foot of row are being put out. Sometimes an individual unit will set seed a little deeper than the one next to it. Units wear differently, causing uneven planting.

While sowing that first critical acre, get off the tractor several times to make sure the planter is operating properly. If seeds are set too deep, seedlings may not emerge, or they may use up too much energy getting out of the soil and become weak.

"Considering the high cost of farming inputs and today's grain prices, replanting thin stands is an expense growers can't afford," Walker says.

Check fertilizer and granular insecticide applicators, too. These units must be in proper working order to use materials efficiently. Chemicals or fertilizer applied too close to the seed row may damage young seedlings. Under certain weather conditions, fertilizer salts may cause injury.

A planter which worked well last year still needs to be checked, since different planting conditions could bring out problems that didn't show up before.

Make sure the press wheel closes the seed furrow properly, Walker says. Any time the furrow is left open there's a risk of chemicals applications. Chemicals in the seed furrow can injure or kill young plants.

The planter may need to be adjusted several times even after planting the first field, especially when going from one farming situation to another. Planting no-till is different from planting under conventional conditions. And planting on black organic soils is different from planting in sandy soils.

"Adjusting planters to field conditions is one of the great management tools farmers have for improvinng efficiency," Walker says. "Not taking the time to do so can cost you a lot of money. The planting operation is the most important thing you do in farming. If a crop doesn't go in properly, you're off on the wrong foot."

"It will take longer to do the job right," Walker concludes, "but in the long run it will pay dividends in better plant stands and fewer crop problems."