

It's That Mesmerizing, Mystifying Sound Of Cicadas . . .

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Lancaster Farming Staff
LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.)
— It's not a lunar eclipse or a new comet streaking across the sky, although it is something that happens only once in 17 years.

It's not something particularly frightening to a farmer and doesn't have any earth-shattering implications for those who care for livestock or horticultural crops.

But the 17-year periodical cicadas are back.

The what?

That's right. The long-legged, big-winged insects that make a sort of extended, slicing, chirping sound in the trees on summer evenings aren't the infamous locusts that people sometimes mistake them for. They're simply called cicadas (pronounced *si-KAY-das*).

That particular rasping sound identifies them. But why the sound?

According to Dr. Tim Elkner, Lancaster County extension agent, the sound you hear is the male mating call, trying to attract females

for egg laying.

Both male and female 17-year cicadas measure about 1½ long. They are similar to the more common annual cicadas, the Dogday Harvestflies, which are actually larger, measuring up to about 1½ inches, according to Elkner.

There are actually about six species of periodical cicadas, three with a 17-year cycle and three with a 13-year cycle.

"The concern that farmers may have is that the eggs are buried in smaller branches, actually the twigs of the tree, where they could cause some damage," said Elkner. That could be a concern for orchardists with younger trees.

What happens is that the female, using the blades of a saw-like device on her abdomen, cuts several small pockets in the bark of a twig before depositing 400-600 eggs.

This process can cause small limbs or seedlings to wilt and may provide an opening for disease. The adults live only about four weeks above ground. But the twig

injury they cause may be apparent for several years.

Periodical cicadas are sometimes called nature's pruners, since they cause the death of small branches on trees.

But for the older, larger oak trees and such, the only concern would be that, once the eggs hatch, the larvae burrow underground and literally feed off the roots. Cicada nymphs spend 17 years from 2-24 inches underground, sucking nutrients from plant roots.

The larvae actually stay underground for 17 years!

On some occasions, the adult cicada sucks fluid from small twigs but does not feed on leaves.

The adult cicadas are clumsy fliers, often colliding with objects in flight.

The sound they make is their most distinctive call, and occurs from dawn until dusk.

Cicadas are completely harmless to humans, don't bite or sting, and are not poisonous. They have natural enemies, however — moles eat the immature cicadas

during their long stay under- adults. A wasp, called the cicada ground. Birds will consume the killer, is another predator.

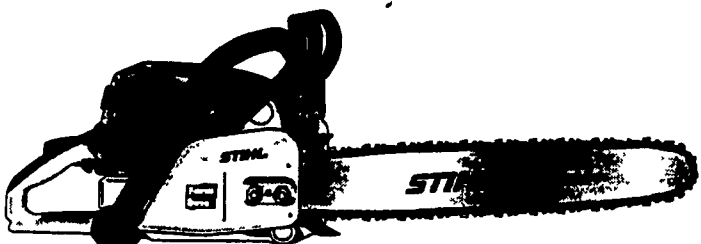


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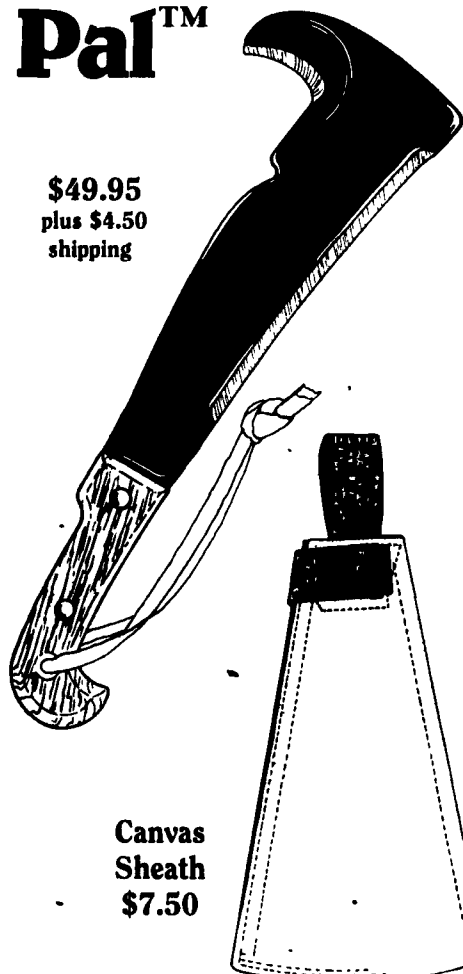
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