

LOWCOUNTRY WEEKLY

HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

THE GARDEN PARTY

by
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The whole concept sounds romantic, doesn't it? Gardens and parties seem to be made for each other. Like Bogie and Bacall, Lucy and Desi, Gin and Tonic.....

I fell in love with the Lowcountry when I was here on vacation. I had looked all over the country for property where I could retire and build the house and garden of my dreams. I bought property here years before I was able to actually build a house on it. I spent those intervening years dreaming about the garden parties I would have.



I had it all planned. Flower laden tables for dinners of no more than eight (for best conversation, you know). Afternoon tea parties with me sitting at a table asking, "China or India?", while serving scones and clotted cream. Barbecues with checkered tablecloths and candles in mason jars. Evening wine tastings with Vivaldi playing softly, and 15 or 20 of my closest friends, oohing and aahing over my delightful and fragrant garden.

To paraphrase Margaret Evans in a recent column, "Are you laughing yet?"

When I finally was able to live here, my first clue that my garden party plans were about to be torpedoed was when I found out about 'no-see-ums'. I'd never even heard of them. Sure, I had heard of gnats, but those were the things that drove

cattle crazy on the Great Plains and terrorized caribou in Alaska. Turns out, gnats had changed their name to 'no-see-ums' and had relocated by the bazillions to the Lowcountry. They're aptly named, too, because you rarely see them unless they are part of a swarm. Your first indication that they're around is a red hot needle-like pain on what appears to be bare skin. Smacking the area is useless. By the time you realize you've been bitten, they've left for new territory. "Well," you think, "they can't be *that* bad; you can barely see them". Hah! Days later you're still scratching and muttering cuss words you'd never use in front of your mother.

And that was just the beginning. I was raised in Texas, where we had what we called 'red ants'. Great big old things that you could see coming and who advertised their colonies with large, volcano shaped mounds. My first experience with the ubiquitous fire ants down here traumatized me. They are the smartest and the sneakiest of all biters.

They're so tiny I couldn't feel them crawling up my ankles until there was an entire regiment of them heading for my nether regions, waiting for their Sergeant to send them the signal to "Attack!!" Followed by my scream and efforts to run for the house while simultaneously pulling down my trousers to see what the heck was happening down there. You could darn well see them now. Divested of my jeans, I turned the hose on myself while jumping up and down and yelling "What the ??". And that wasn't the worst part. During the next days, every single bite (there were 27 of them; I counted) developed pustules which lasted for weeks and they not only itched, they *hurt*.

Fire ants can survive even floods. They entwine themselves together to make a living raft which can successfully float for weeks. And their visible mounds belie underground tunnels which can stretch for miles! No wonder we can't ever get rid of them.

Seems like everything in my yard bites. I was driving my lawn tractor when suddenly, I thought I had been shot. Literally. I thought some hunter had missed his target and hit me. I had obviously driven over an underground hive, because when I brought my hand up to my neck, I encountered a still angry wasp (or a hornet, I can't tell the difference), who hadn't done enough damage yet, so it stung my hand, too! What chutzpah!

We haven't even talked about mosquitoes, chiggers, snakes, alligators and spiders. And while Palmetto Bugs don't bite, they can sure give you a start when you turn on the light in a dark room. Eeeouw. I have convinced my bug-phobic daughter-in-law, Sylvia, that those black beetle-like things are just harmless Palmetto Bugs, native to the Lowcountry; not cockroaches. Don't give me away. Plato would have called it a noble lie.

And those darn love bugs. When they make their twice yearly visits, you learn to keep your mouth shut when you're outside. Don't ever yawn, sneeze or yodel. It's an experience you don't want to repeat when a couple of love bugs (doing you know what...they don't call 'em love bugs for nothing!) fly into your open mouth and do the shag on your soft palate. Double entendre intended.

So there went my dream of garden parties. Other than to work in the garden, my participation there is now limited to strolling. To be still is to be attacked, so there is really no good reason for the benches and chairs I've dotted throughout the

garden. And as for evening strolls with a glass of wine, except for a few weeks, that's a mostly unrealized dream, too. The minute the sun goes down, or even hides behind a cloud, the mosquitoes and no-see-ums pounce. My summer perfume of choice is 'Deep Woods Off'. Did you know that stuff will melt your fingernail polish?

In defeat, I glassed in my screened porch and now my guests and I can sit in air conditioned and heated comfort to enjoy the garden all year. But entertaining there just ain't a garden party.

P.S. Every single word of this article is true.

Sandra