

FAIRCHILD'S TROPICAL GARDEN COLUMN

Kenneth Setzer

The reviled roach and its role

When I lived in New York, I was plagued by what we called waterbugs. They are what Floridians call palmetto bugs. Nearly universally despised, roaches play a necessary garden role as recyclers. Why do we hate them so?

How can I begin to wax sentimental about roaches, those loathed inhabitants of the dirty, filthy, disease-ridden corners of our world? What purpose could they have besides tormenting us? I began to think about this:

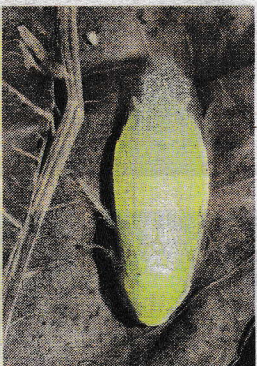
Mosquitoes are far, far more harmful to us than roaches. Malaria, transmitted by *Anopheles* mosquitoes, killed more than 500,000 people in 2013, most of them children, according to the World Health Organization. If I were a roach, I'd be yelling "SEE? SEE? Mosquitoes did that, not us!"

In most cities, you'll encounter palmetto bugs, also known as the American roach (*Periplaneta americana*) or the smaller German roach (*Blattella germanica*). What we call roaches fall within

the order Blattodea (along with termites). Those that hang around houses are called peridomestic.

In South Florida, we may encounter many different species of roach in the garden and the home. There's the smallish cricket-like oriental cockroach (*Blattella orientalis*), and I am told the huge Madagascar hissing roach (*Gromphadorhina portentosa*) has been spotted, but I've never seen one outside a zoo display. The latter is a common insect pet, and I dare say, cute. Unlike many other roaches, hissers cannot fly.

When they do fly, they do so haphazardly, like a new driver veering out of control. They don't simply flee but make you think they may inadvertently fly into your face. However, the Cuban cockroach (*Panchlora nivea*), when disturbed, seems to flutter away unobtrusively like a moth. Like most roaches, it is nocturnal and not an indoor pest. Unlike most roaches, it resembles a pale green pumpkin seed.



KENNETH SETZER/COURTESY

A Cuban roach is unlikely to stray indoors.

Back to katsaridaphobia, or cockroach phobia. Roaches just look dirty, scurrying and obstinate. Truth is, I've found very little evidence that they spread much disease. It's certainly possible, but doesn't seem to be the rule. Worsening asthma and allergy symptoms have been linked to roach exposure, especially in children. However, I'm more inclined to blame industrial pollution. Roaches do like to excrete a lot, though, and that may cause a reaction.

Most are omnivores, though

some roaches are specialists. The ones that pester us, like palmetto bugs and German roaches, are the former. They like rotting wood and decaying organic material — detritus of the forest floor. This is where they help us in breaking down and recycling dead plants into, eventually, rich soil. My compost bin is full of roaches of at least a couple species, including very big and well-fed palmetto bugs. They speed the breakdown of my yard waste into compost, though admittedly, opening the compost lid at night, flashlight in hand, is not for the squeamish.

Replacing rotten wood in your home's structure will reduce its attractiveness to roaches. Sealing areas where pipes enter and exit the bathroom and kitchen helps. Dripping pipes are a water source and help to cause nearby wood to decay, so fix them.

I keep leaf litter in my yard but not about the house. A good exterminator can use a minimal amount of poison strategically to help. Avoid storing corrugated

cardboard, especially in a warm, humid garage. Roaches adore cardboard, particularly in the form of a box filled with paper and glue to eat. I know the horrors that can foster.

The Florida woods cockroach *Eurygottis floridana* is a native originally called the palmetto bug. A bit shorter and rounder than the others, it usually stays outdoors under leaf litter and other debris. When threatened, it can emit a foul-smelling discharge.

The smoky brown roach (*Periplaneta fuliginosa*) is another you are likely to encounter around the yard. It is uniformly dark brown, without the lighter thorax of the closely related American roach.

Roaches are everywhere. We can reduce their presence in our homes, but they will always be near. Try and remember that they look gross but aren't all that bad.

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