I get calls all the time from gardeners who have found things they do not recognize, and who fear the worst. There are a lot of things in nature that I call “gee whiz” items. These are a myriad of things sometimes found on plants and within the landscape that look really odd or unusual, but cause little damage, and should be no cause for concern.

Insect galls are one such item. There are thousands of species of insects that have unique relationships with plants. Many of these galls are caused by tiny wasps, aphids, psyllids, phylloxera and flies. Each species of these gall-forming insects, causes galls on a specific host plant. Galls are a growth of plant tissue which is caused by plant growth regulators produced by the insect which interact with plant hormones to produce unique outgrowths which can be many sizes and shapes. Most galls are found on leaves, but some are also found on twigs. The basic life cycle of these insects are the same: the adult insect lays eggs on or in the plant tissue. The eggs hatch into the larval stage. The larvae stimulate the plant to grow a tumor-like structure where they spend their days feeding until they pupate and turn into the adult to start the process all over again. This cycle is normally annually with only one generation per year.

There are many unusual shapes of galls that are often colorful. There are over 300 types of galls that occur on oaks, and the appearance of the gall and the species of oak on which it occurs, are the primary means of identification of the insect that caused it. Other common trees that have may sometimes have galls are, hackberry, hickory, maple, witch hazel, black gum, willow, honey locust, ash, elm, tulip poplar, dogwood, poplar and red bay to name a few. Insect galls cause little damage to the host and no action needs to be taken.
There are also some unusual slime molds and mushrooms that catch the eye and cause concern. One of these is a slime mold that I have written about before that is affectionately called “dog vomit fungus.” This slime mold is commonly found growing on top of the mulch in the landscape. The mulch that is the most notorious for having this slime mold is hardwood mulch, and all the new dyed mulches which are made primarily from ground up pallets and other recycled wood products. This slime mold is totally harmless, it just looks bad. The only way to get rid of the slime mold, is to switch to another type of mulch.

Another slime mold that is commonly seen during hot humid weather is the one commonly found on the lawn where it is easy to see. It can actually grow anywhere (I have even seen it covering an azalea), but it is most obvious on the green grass. This slime mold is dark gray to black, roughly circular, and is one to two feet across. Slime molds decompose organic matter, and when the environmental conditions are correct, they grow above ground and “crawl” up surfaces to produce spores. Slime molds are one of a plethora of decomposing organisms which help recycle dead plant parts, and serve an important role in nature.

Before we leave the discussion of fungi, there is one particular mushroom that really gets people excited, and that is the stinkhorn. These are one of many mushroom-producing fungi that is not only brightly colored, but has an odor that would gag a rat. This mushroom is bright orange with a slimy coating which contains darker spores. The odor attracts flies and other carrion feeding insects, which unknowingly serve to spread the slimy spores which stick to the insect. These mushrooms are generally produced in the summer and early fall.

A lot of people have shade gardens, and a variety of ferns are great for these situations. Ferns are a very primitive form of plant. Unlike the higher plants, ferns do not produce flowers, but do produce simple cup-like structures called sori on the underside of their fronds. The sori
contain spores which like plant seeds, germinate to grow new plants. May people seeing the sori for the first time often think it is some type of insect or disease problem.

The last group of organisms I’ll cover today are the lichens. Lichen are typically gray-green and can look scaly or mossy. Sometimes they will produce fruiting structures that look like a miniature Champaign glass. Lichens are composed of an algae and a fungus which have a symbiotic relationship, which means they function together for mutual benefit. The algae contains chlorophyll and so can photosynthesize like a plant, and the fungus is good at collecting water and nutrients from the air and from organic debris. In essence, the algae functions as the leaves of a plant, and the fungus functions like the roots of a plant. The basic growth requirements for lichen are cracks and crevices that collect organic debris, and sunlight.

Often people will bring in dead or weakly growing branches from a tree or shrub which has lichen growing on it. They blame the death of the branch on the lichen, but that is not the case. Often the plant is just not growing vigorously, or maybe some other pest killed the branch, and the lichen is just taking advantage of a sunny spot to grow. Lichen can be found growing on tree trunks, rocks, a wooden fence, a brick wall, or virtually anywhere that has enough sunlight. The presence of lichens is an indicator of good air quality.