Lilburn home draws fireflies, fascination

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LILBURN - On warm summer evenings, Gwen and Paul McDonald's yard looks like Christmas, alight with the glow of thousands upon thousands of fireflies.

Gwen, a retired Trickum Middle School teacher, became fascinated with the so-called "charismatic coleoptera," or fireflies, upon seeing the first mass population swarm her yard five years ago. She has since made the appearance of the fireflies a social gathering, turning warm summer evenings at her home into a new kind of garden party.

As of late, the McDonald's' home has become a bit of a neighborhood gathering spot thanks to these gleaming and acrobatic characters. Gwen prints her own "Annual Firefly Fling" packet the first weekend of June, chock full of firefly facts, and neighbors and family, including the McDonald's' young grandchildren, gather to watch the display.

"I never knew what to do with them," said Gwen. "So we would set up chairs and watch them like Christmas lights in the trees."

Fireflies, or "lampyridae," are winged beetles which appear inconspicuous in the daylight but transform into mobile incandescent lamps beginning at twilight. These fireflies partake in a luminescent mating dance, using patterns and a flash of color to attract others of the same species.

This light show by the males creates a luminous dance of distinctive blink patterns for an audience of eager females to interpret and distinguish. The response is a corresponding blink to alert the male and arrange for a meeting.

James Lloyd, a professor at the University of Florida and an expert on fireflies, compared the mating ritual to that of a college bar. The flash patterns fireflies demonstrate, he said, are the tactics used to entice a mate, much like with changes to human appearance such as dress, hair style or make-up.

"This is kind of what human life is like," said Lloyd, who teaches a course in biology and natural history with fireflies. "I tell most of my classes that it's like what they see in a bar."

Kathrin Stanger-Hall and David Hall of the University of Georgia visited the McDonald's' home in mid-June to witness the display. The researchers reported the presence of fireflies of the Photuris genus, the so-called "femme fatales" of North American fireflies. These fireflies prey upon flying males by mimicking particular signals and luring them to hover near the