The questions never stop coming. All fall and winter people have not forgotten about the 2016 outbreak of oak leaf itch mites. This itch mite is the pest that causes your friends and neighbors to hibernate indoors until a hard freeze brings this insect apocalypse to an end. As another growing season approaches, people are rightfully concerned about the mites’ return for a third year. Johnson County K-State Extension has been asked to predict if there will be an outbreak this year. Since I don’t have a crystal ball, let me explain what we do and don’t know at this time.

Let me be clear — there is no way we can predict the oak itch mites’ return. We may not even know how severe the bites might be until it starts to happen. The best answer is my patented, “it depends.” It depends on a number of factors, some of which we know and others that we cannot predict.

Here’s what we know about the oak leaf itch mite. Current research has shown they feed on the larvae of insects (mites) found on Pin Oak trees. The known host is called the oak margin gall. This means there may be an “if/then” scenario. That is, if the margin gall is present in large numbers this spring and summer then it may mean a potential problem in the fall.

But here is where the “it depends” answer comes into play. The current thinking in the research community is that the itch mite may have a wider host range than just oak margin gall. Researchers are wondering if it can feed on other species of oak gall larvae, or if there are other host plant species besides oak. If so, then we have no way of drawing a correlation between the potential outbreak based on the number of margin galls on oak trees.

Talking to our Kansas State University entomologist, there appears to be little research being conducted around the country on the itch mite, even though its range continues to spread. You might ask why there is not more research occurring. This mite is a human health issue. Well it boils down to another cliché, and that is “show me the money.” There does not seem to be funding either in the public or private sector pouring into fund top-notch research.

Even if we did know the host range for the itch mite, predicting a fall outbreak in the spring still would be a guessing game. Forecasting would probably not be much better than the weatherman predicting a big winter storm a week out or even 48 hours in advance. There are many other environmental factors that can influence the development of insect and mite populations.

We know that it takes a food source for the mite to feed and reproduce. Remember, the only host that is scientifically confirmed is the leaf margin gall. But there could be other food hosts. Factors such as rainfall, temperature and humidity can significantly affect the life cycle development of the itch mite. These are all evolving conditions over the spring and summer months. So you can see, predicting whether the oak leaf itch mite will make a return for a third year in a row is a “wait and see.”

We can focus on what we can do, but unfortunately the answer to that question is simple — not much. There are no practical controls or prevention for the oak itch mite. There are no pesticides that can be applied to the tree to effectively prevent the oak galls from forming on the tree. The galls are the result of a small flying insect that stings the unfolding leaf, creating the gall growth which is the home for its egg and offspring. That is the larvae in which the itch mite feeds.

After feeding and reproducing, the mite then exits the leaf in the fall, looking to find a protected location to overwinter. This is when millions of microscopic mites are blown in the wind, falling or landing on us. Their bite results in an intensely itchy rash that
Learn to share and edit digital photos

You’ve switched from film to digital photo taking. Maybe by choice or perhaps because the new equipment was a gift from your kids. It’s true the pictures are better quality, but now you’ve filled up the memory card on your digital camera or smartphone. How do you get the pictures from the device to print? How can you share those vacation and family photos with others?

A new Johnson County Park and Recreation District electronics class can show you how. The photo sharing and editing class is taking place at 9 a.m. Saturday, April 22.

Learn how to transfer, organize, share and print photos. The instructor will also cover basic editing skills and savvy photo additions like borders and text. Participants must bring devices and chargers to class.

The cost for the three-hour class is $25 for residents and $28 for non-residents. Please call 913-826-3160 for more information.

Visit www.jcprd.com for more information or to find additional class opportunities. JCPRD offers a variety of educational classes, programs and activities for people of all ages. 