

What are *those* bugs?



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Master Gardener

QUESTION: A couple weeks ago I noticed a lot of orange and black bugs all around the front of my home. Yuck! What are these and what are they doing at my house? Do they cause damage?

ANSWER: When we (finally!) got some warm weather back in early May, the boxelder bugs crawled out from their hiding spots to celebrate the sun and a new summer season.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? We were all ready for some nice weather too.

You may have a large quantity of these bugs and wonder what kind of damage they are doing to your plants and home. For the most part, boxelder bugs are considered a nuisance insect and cause little damage. They are capable of biting, but seldom do. They do not cause harm to people or pets.

One of my most memorable days working in the Master Gardener Plant Clinic years ago involved a frustrated homeowner with complaints of boxelder bugs who used a unique idea of how to get rid of them. Let's just say I'm glad I didn't live next door to him as it involved using a flammable liquid and a method where the end didn't begin to justify the means...

Boxelder bugs belong to the order Hemiptera, or the true bugs. When entomologists speak of "bugs," they are speaking about the Hemiptera order, not insects in general. True bugs have piercing and sucking mouthparts, and their wings are partially made of membrane.

Boxelder bugs are approximately 1/2 inch long and adults are mostly black with three red lines on their thorax. The wings lie flat when at rest. Young nymphs are bright red.

They are close relatives to squash bugs and leaf-footed bugs, which are known to emit very unpleasant odors. Boxelder bugs are not scentless and for this reason, vacuuming is preferred to smashing.

It is useful to understand the life cycle of the boxelder bug when figuring out your control strategy. Adult females lay eggs on preferred trees



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Boxelder bug nymphs are bright red.

(box elders, some maples, ash) in the spring. Nymphs hatch in 10-14 days and begin feeding on seedpods and trees.

They develop into adults during the summer and will lay their eggs in August/September. This second generation is when most people are bothered by boxelder bugs – they will congregate on the warm south and west walls of homes and come inside your home in September/October. They are just trying to find a place to overwinter – they do not breed indoors.

The cycle then repeats.

Even though they do feed on some tree debris, boxelder bugs seldom cause any real damage. Occasionally some "cat-facing" (dimpling of fruit) damage in commercial apple and pear orchards can be observed but most of the issue with these bugs is more of the nuisance factor.

Their fecal material can stain light-colored surfaces, so if you have a large number swarming on a wall, use the vacuum cleaner or a hose to remove them. Smashing, although you might find it rewarding, may leave discoloration.

Chemical treatment is seldom needed and is rarely as effective as vacuuming. There are a few chemicals approved for outside use, but these should be applied by a commercial applicator. Your best defense is exclusion – seal up cracks and crevices around windows and doors,

and repair torn screens. Eliminate piles of leaf debris close to your house – by doing this, you eliminate places where bugs can overwinter.

If you have a box elder tree, keep seeds swept up.

If you have the occasional bug inside, just bring out the vacuum cleaner and take care of it. If you vacuum up a bunch of bugs, remove the vacuum bag or contents to an outside location.

By mid-June, we may be noticing fewer of these pests. Remember, though, they will be back again in great numbers in October, when they will seek warm places to overwinter. Even though they can be a nuisance, put up with them for a week or two, and when the weather cools, they will be gone until next spring.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 S E Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the Oregon State University Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.

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