

Bugged out



COURTESY PHOTOS

The Indian meal moth will lay its eggs in grain, flour and even pet food.
Courtesy photo

OSU Master Gardeners field questions about some common household pests

LARRY SUTTON

The Master Gardeners answer hundreds of questions each year on a variety of gardening related issues. By far the largest number of questions have to do with insects and spiders. Questions can vary from “Do I have a brown recluse spider in my garage?” (No, there have been no verified brown recluse spiders found in Oregon) to “What do I do with the larvae in my compost pile?” (Leave them there; they are helping with the composting). Two questions that appear to have a wide interest are as follows:

Q: Each year we seem to be inundated by a swarm of red and black insects. They will land on the side of our house and occasionally we find them inside on the window sill or the floor below the window. What are they and are they harmful to my home or family?

A: For most people, the western boxelder bug (*Boisea rubrolineata*) is just a nuisance pest and does no damage to homes or other dwellings.

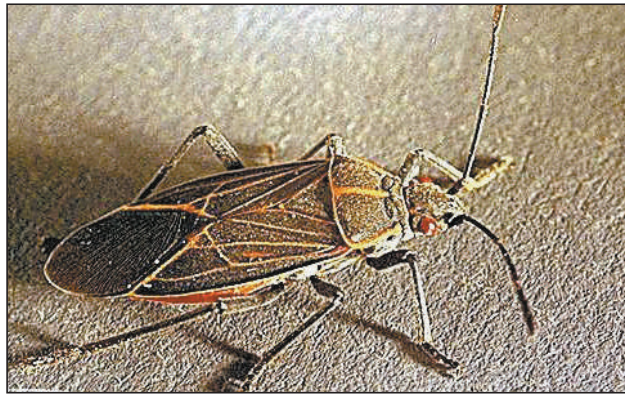
The adult is an oblong shape and will be approximately ½ inch long by ⅓ inch wide. Their backs are black with three red stripes on the thorax and several red lines on each wing. The abdomen is red.

While it is usually the adults that become household pests, the nymphs can be found on boxelder trees (hence their name) with occasional appearances on ash and maple trees. Some nut and fruit trees will also attract them.

As you have noticed, they do tend to congregate on the sunny side of your home in August and September. After the fall mating, they will migrate in large groups looking for sheltered areas. In your case, the place they chose was your home.

They will sometimes work their way into your home, if you have openings around your windows or doors. The best way to stop their entry is to patch cracks and replace worn screens on windows or doors.

Once the bugs are inside, they can be removed by simply vacuuming them up. When you finish vacuuming, take the bag outside to empty it. Keeping a full bag of boxelder bugs attached to your vacuum cleaner just hides them until they crawl out and once again infest your home. A word of caution is needed here. Do not crush these bugs. When crushed, they give off an offensive odor.



Boxelder bugs can be a nuisance, but cause little damage in Oregon.
Courtesy photo



The Indian meal moth larvae can infest grains and flour.

Chemical treatment is never recommended. Chemicals are no more effective than vacuuming and create far greater problems in the home. If you have a tree that is heavily infested both adults and nymphs can be removed by using a forceful spray of water. In extreme cases insecticidal soap may be added.

Outside, boxelder bugs do not cause damage to ornamental trees. However, they can cause distortion or puckering on fruits. They pose no threat, other than nuisance to people and pets. If and when they make it into your home, they can cause some discoloration to curtains if not removed early.

Q: I am seeing more and more of a tiny moth-like creature in my home. They fly around as if lost going in first one direction and then another. How do I evict these unwanted guests from our once happy home?

A: Your pest is probably the Indian meal moth or the Mediterranean flour moth. Both have a half inch wing span and fly erratically when in the air. The Indian meal moth is a silver beige color and has coppery colored wings. The Mediterranean flour moth has silvery-beige wings with dark flecks.

Unlike most insects which comes into your home uninvited, these two moths are brought into the home by humans; they feed on many food products found in your kitchen and usually are brought into the house as eggs in one of these products.

They will feed on grain-based foods such as corn meal, rice, barley, cereal, oatmeal, corn starch, dry bread crumbs, any premixed baking product, instant mashed potatoes and even unpopped popcorn.

Dry cat and dog food stored in the open make great hosts. Spices, powdered milk and worst of all, as far as my wife is concerned, chocolate, are also of concern. If you are using grain based rodent baits, they can also attract the pest. Once the pest has entered a home it does not take long for it to invade any product that is open and not in a sealed container.

Chemicals are ineffective against these insects and trying to eradicate them with a flyswatter, while sometimes emotionally rewarding, is just as ineffective. The most effective way to rid your home of them is to deny them their source of food.

Check all possible food sources and if infected, get rid of them. You will know they are infected by the presence of a web surrounded larvae or small silken threads inside the container.

Food should be stored in food safe containers that contain either screw-on caps or snap-on caps that provide an airtight seal. Plastic bags, tinfoil, or cellophane are no deterrent; they can wiggle into almost anything to lay their eggs.

If you must keep your food in bags or boxes, store the containers in the freezer or refrigerator. Bulk pet food and bird seed can be stored in its original container if kept inside a garbage container in the garage.

Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg.

Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.