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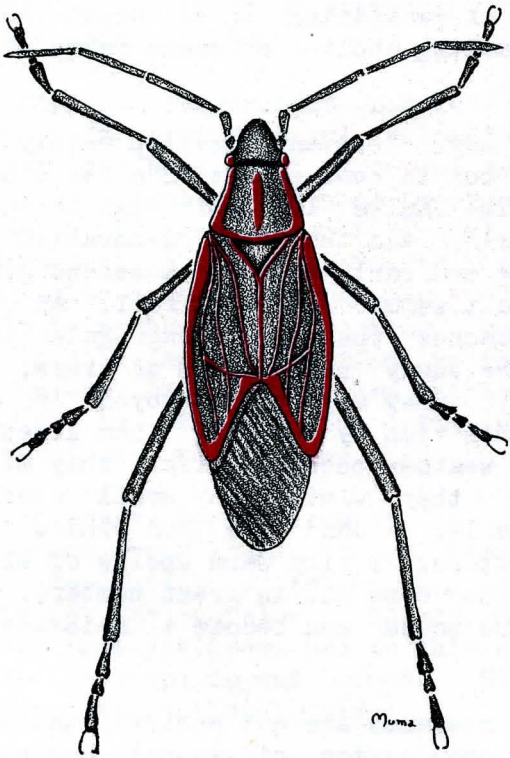
Boxelder Bugs



Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics
University of Nebraska College of Agriculture, and the United States
Department of Agriculture cooperating, W. H. Brokaw, Director, Lincoln.

BOXELDER BUGS

O. S. Bare, Extension Entomologist

Boxelder bugs are slate-black insects marked with three red lines on the back. The young bugs or nymphs carry a much greater amount of red. Adult bugs are approximately a half inch long and about one third as wide as long. Damage done by boxelder bugs is slight, and usually is of little importance, but their habit of wintering in or about houses and flying or crawling about the rooms makes them very annoying.

Boxelder bugs feed and develop mainly on boxelder trees, but to some extent on a few other trees and plants. The adults lay their eggs on the plants during the spring and the first generation develops in late spring and early summer. A second generation develops in late summer and early fall. As cool fall weather approaches the bugs congregate in great numbers on the sunny south sides of trees, fences, and buildings. They may be destroyed in enormous numbers at this time by spraying them directly with kerosene. As weather becomes colder, they migrate to houses where they winter in small cracks, and crevices in walls, around door and window casings, and in foundations. During warm spells of winter and early spring they come out in great numbers, scatter throughout the house and become a nuisance to the housewife.

Control measures are not entirely satisfactory, and usually a combination of several are necessary. The bugs can best be controlled in their young or nymphal stages when they may be destroyed on boxelder trees by spraying with kerosene emulsion or miscible oil sprays. A satisfactory emulsion may be made by dissolving 1/2 pound of laundry soap in a gallon of boiling water (preferably rain water or water softened with washing soda), adding 2 gallons of kerosene to the boiling suds after removing from the

fire and emulsifying by running the mixture back upon itself through a spray pump several times. This emulsion is then diluted to make 50 gallons. This formula may be cut down proportionately where smaller quantities are required. Miscible oils should be used according to directions of the manufacturers. Very strong nicotine-soap sprays, and nicotine dusts containing 4 per cent of nicotine, also are fairly effective against the immature insects. When the bugs have collected in large masses on the ground, sides of trees, or on buildings, in the fall, large numbers may be destroyed by spraying with kerosene or pouring hot water on them.

The Michigan Experiment Station has reported that a spray of sodium lauryl sulphate is effective against boxelder bugs. This material is available at most grocery stores as a common washing powder that is sold under the trade name of "Dreft". The recommended formula is 1 tablespoonful to 1 quart of water although weaker concentrations have been used successfully. It is rather slow in action, requiring 24 to 48 hours to kill, and to be effective must be sprayed directly on the bugs to wet them thoroughly. It is reported to be harmless to ordinary vegetation, paints, varnishes, and fabrics.

After they have migrated to their winter quarters in or about houses control becomes a greater problem. Persistent collection and destruction of them is effective but slow. Household fly sprays temporarily paralyze them, and in this condition they may easily be swept up and burned. Stomach poisons are useless against these pests.

As the boxelder is the chief food plant of this bug, the removal of boxelder trees, particularly the female or seed-producing ones, will sometimes reduce their numbers. However, as the bugs feed to some extent on several other trees and plants, removal of boxelders can be only partly effective and cannot be recommended unless other and more desirable shade trees replace them.