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G75-237 Boxelder Bugs (Revised June 1992)

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Boxelder Bugs

This NebGuide discusses the importance, life history and control of boxelder bugs.

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Description



Boxelder bug adults are about 1/2 inch long. They are slate-gray with three red lines behind the head and red lines on the wings. The rear half of the wings have a reddish margin and the abdomen under the wings is also red. Nymphs (young bugs) are bright red with darker heads. They resemble adults, but their wings do not fully develop until they reach maturity.

Boxelder Bug

Host Plants

The primary host plant of the boxelder bug is the female (seed-bearing) boxelder tree where they feed by sucking plant juices. Boxelder bugs have also been observed on male boxelder, ash, maple and occasionally on strawberries, grasses, and various other plants, but they usually are incapable of full development on these hosts.

Damage

Plants are seldom injured seriously enough to justify insecticidal control. However, when large numbers of young bugs are observed on boxelder trees, insecticidal sprays will reduce the number that reach maturity and

become nuisance pests during the fall, winter, and spring. When seeking an overwintering site, boxelder bugs often enter buildings through small openings around windows, doors, conduits, and pipes and through small cracks in or above the foundation. Large numbers may be seen around foundations when seeking entry. Inside the home boxelder bugs may stain curtains and walls. They do not damage food or other items in the home, nor do they bite humans or pets.

Life History

In the spring, after emerging from overwintering sites, adult females deposit small, red, oval eggs on host plants. Other eggs may be laid on deposits of boxelder, ash, maple or elm seeds which accumulate near the home. Bright red nymphs hatch from eggs in 10 to 14 days. Nymphs suck plant sap until mid-summer when they mature into adults. These adults lay eggs for a second generation. After maturing, second generation adults seek overwintering sites. Activity continues well beyond frost as insects sun themselves on vertical walls on warm fall afternoons.

Prevention

Removing boxelder trees from the premises may help reduce boxelder bug numbers. However, since the adults are good flyers, even homes at a considerable distance from host trees may be invaded. Wide-area removal of boxelder trees is not suggested, as the shade value of these trees is more important than the nuisance caused by the bugs. When planting shade trees, preference should be given to species other than boxelder, their preferred host.

Insecticidal Control

When young bugs are observed on boxelder trees, spraying will reduce the number reaching maturity. This is one of the most effective methods of reducing migrations later in the season. Insecticides registered for control of boxelder bugs on boxelder trees include: carbaryl (Sevin), chlorpyrifos (Dursban) and diazinon.

Control Outside the Home

Remove boxelder, ash, elm and maple seeds wherever they accumulate to help reduce boxelder bug reproduction. When bugs congregate near foundations and sides of the home, use residual sprays such as chlorpyrifos (Dursban), carbaryl (Sevin), diazinon, propoxur (Baygon) or carbaryl (Sevin). Non-chemical alternatives include insecticidal soaps or hot, soapy water.

Thorough coverage is essential for adequate control. Sprays may need to be repeated as more boxelder bugs arrive.

Control in the Home

Caulk all openings around windows and doors and in walls, siding or foundations. The best method of control once insects have entered the home is to use a vacuum cleaner. If only an occasional bug is observed, a fly swatter makes an effective weapon.

If large numbers of boxelder bugs enter the home, a household aerosol spray containing pyrethrins can be used. Foggers and fumigators containing pyrethrins or permethrin are appropriate for room treatment. Follow the directions on the container to release the material, and then close the room for several hours. Before re-entering the room, open windows and doors to allow the remaining fog or mist to dissipate. Sweep up and dispose of immobilized insects immediately.

Caution

Insecticides are poisons and must be handled and used with care to avoid accidental poisoning of humans or pets. When using an insecticide, do not breathe the fumes or allow the insecticide to contact your body. Always wash thoroughly after using an insecticide and change clothes at once if any is spilled on clothing. If any insecticide is spilled on the skin, wash the area immediately with soap and water. Take care not to contaminate food or feed. Always read, understand and follow label directions.

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