

## **BOX ELDER BUGS**

*MASTER GARDENER COLUMN by Gail Culver, Consumer Horticulture Educator  
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Don't panic if you find box elder bugs in your yards or homes. This is a common occurrence right now. Box elder bugs invade buildings, especially during the warm days of autumn, to seek shelter sites for overwintering. They are attracted to lights will readily fly in open doors and windows. Indoors, these bugs are a nuisance by their presence, produce a foul odor when crushed and may stain curtains with fecal matter. Outdoors, they can be found clustering in large numbers on the sides of or under trees, buildings and structures. Large populations are often correlated with long, hot, dry summers. During warm winter and spring days, they may become more active, moving from their hiding places into living spaces. Although they do not cause damage to buildings, clothes, food, or humans, populations are annoying. Since the migration of the adults is taking place now, the box elder bugs are everywhere and we have been receiving a number of calls in the Master Gardener office asking about them. Other than being a nuisance, box elder bugs do very little damage to trees and none to household structures.

Adult box-elder bugs are flat-backed, elongated, narrow, about ½ inch long, 1/3 inch wide and dark brownish-black with three lengthwise red stripes on the thorax, a red line along each side and an oblique red line on each wing. The body is also bright red or orange-red. Eggs are a rusty red color and are not often seen as they are deposited on the box elder tree. They nymphs, also found on the trees, are bright red in color with the head end darker. Nymphs resemble adults bur do not have fully developed wings and are not able to reproduce. The change from nymph to adult is a gradual one.

The box elder bugs pass the winter in the adult stage in dry, sheltered places such as buildings or houses, where they have accumulated in gregarious masses. When the weather warms up in the spring, the bugs leave their places of hibernations to fly to box elder trees where they deposit their eggs. The eggs are usually deposited in bark crevices and hatch in 11 to 14 days. The nymphs feed by inserting their beaks into leaves, fruit or soft seeds and sucking the plant juices. Feeding continues throughout the summer and the nymphs gradually mature becoming adults as cold weather approaches. In some areas there may be two broods of this insect, one reaching maturity in mid-summer and the second one in early fall.

Since the presence of these bugs is associated with box elder trees, you could replace the box elder trees with other tree species, if you wish to eliminate this pest; or you could keep only the male trees, which would help to reduce its numbers.

Outdoor insecticides have been used effectively on nymphs when they are actively feeding. Either the insecticide malathion or carbaryl (Sevin) may be used effectively on trees to control the nymphs when they are feeding. **BE SURE TO FOLLOW MANUFACTURER'S DIRECTIONS WHEN USING ANY PESTISIDE.** A soapy water spray can also be used outside on masses of bugs perched on and along foundations. Repeated applications may be necessary.

Indoor vacuuming up the bugs and discarding the contents of the vacuum bag when finished is a good method of control. Be sure to discard the contents of the bag; if they are left inside, they may crawl out in the storage area.

It is also a good idea to eliminate potential hiding places, such as piles of boards, rocks, leaves, grass and other debris close to the house. Rake leaves and grass away from the foundation, especially on the south and west side of the structure. Be sure to caulk and close openings where box elder bugs can enter the house such as around light fixtures, doors and windows, unscreened vents, holes in walls around utility pipes or conduits, air conditioners, heat pump lines and through the foundation. They are also attracted to lights and can fly in open doors and windows. Screen all windows, doors, crawl spaces, exhaust and roof vents and louvers. Tightening up entry routes for the box elder bugs in the most permanent solution.

The Master Gardeners at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Genesee County are available to answer gardening questions every Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. until noon by calling 343-3040, extension 127, or by stopping by our office at 420 East Main Street, Batavia. You may also reach them via e-mail at: [geneseemg@cornell.edu](mailto:geneseemg@cornell.edu).