



BOXELDER BUGS BACK AGAIN

By Joel Allen, Extension Educator

Many homeowners around the county are already experiencing boxelder bugs which are trying to move into their homes for the cold months ahead. These fall and winter visitors, *Leptocoris trivittatus*, are actually annual visitors. The boxelder bug in the home will not cause any injury to the structure, stored foods, humans or pets. They won't even mate inside during the winter months. But they can cause a mess on fabric or flooring when swatted with a fly swatter or stepped on. Boxelder bugs have been here in Columbia County all of the 26 years I have been here, and probably for many years before, but I am amazed at how many folks seem to be experiencing this pest for the very first time.

The boxelder bug has proven to be a pest both of outdoor trees as well as a household nuisance. It is the latter that is of most concern to homeowners and the reason for this column now. The boxelder bug has been around all summer, but as days get shorter and cooler, they seek protected, dry places in which to overwinter as adults. These dry places include our attics, wall voids, crawl spaces, and the like. During the sunny warm days of fall they can be found crawling by the thousands on the sides of homes, on porches, walks and driveways. As each day gets cooler in the afternoon, the boxelder bugs look for a place to be safe and protected. It is at this time that they will seek out any crack or crevice into which they can crawl. Often these cracks will lead to an attic, crawl space, or wall void. The next warm day, they became active again and many will leave these spaces and return outdoors only to repeat the process nearly every day until it turns and stays cold. They can also repeat this process during a winter thaw or warm spell and again in the spring as days get longer. It is when they move into the home in the fall that many people become a bit aggravated with them.

The boxelder bug is about ½ inch in length and dark or black in color with very conspicuous red markings on its back and wing margins. The insect body itself, can also be bright red. The bug overwinters as an adult and lays its eggs in the spring on a variety of plant material, but most often on the boxelder tree, *Acer negundo*, a “weed” tree which can be found growing pretty much throughout Columbia County. Once the eggs hatch, the resulting nymphs feed on the sap of the tree foliage, flowers, and soft seeds. Feeding continues throughout the summer as the boxelder bug matures. As fall approaches, their instinct is to stop feeding and seek protected places in which to overwinter. So you see, the boxelder bug has actually been here all the time. You haven't noticed it until now.

How does one best manage the boxelder bug? Eliminating boxelder trees might help, but we suspect the insect would just move to some other plant. The use of any particular product, organic or synthetic, has not proven very practical since the timing, thoroughness, and repetition of the application is important. How could one spray every tree entirely?????

The best means of management, therefore, is in the fall when they try to move in. Sweeping up and killing the bugs from porches and driveways or washing them down with water from a garden hose will reduce their population, but one must be persistent. Caulking, sealing, and screening any small cracks and crevices will also help and is more of a permanent solution. Those you sweep up can be dropped in a pail of bleach or boiling water to kill them. Repeating this daily will certainly reduce their population, but not eliminate them altogether.

Yes, it appears boxelder bugs are here to stay. They do not have many natural predators so do what you can to keep them out, but also try and get use to them.