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Boxelder bugs: characteristics and control

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Quick Facts

- Boxelder bugs are a nuisance in and around homes from fall through early spring.
- The bug overwinters as an adult in protected places such as houses or other buildings.
- Removing female boxelder trees is the most permanent solution to the problem, although this may not be practical or desirable.
- Laundry detergents offer safe, effective control when applied directly to the insects.
- Use insecticide sprays for control on boxelder trees and building exteriors.

For most people, the boxelder bug needs no introduction. This bug is about one-half inch long as an adult, black in color with three red lines on the thorax (that part just behind the head), a red line along each side, and a diagonal red line on each wing. The immature forms (Figure 1) are smaller and are easily distinguished from the adults (Figure 2) by their red abdomens and lack of wings. Boxelder bugs become a nuisance in and around homes from fall through early spring.

Boxelder bugs feed on a variety of plants, but their favorite food is boxelder seed pods, which are found only on the female boxelder tree. These bugs seldom develop in sufficient numbers to be a nuisance unless a female boxelder tree is in the neighborhood.

Overwintering

The boxelder bug overwinters as an adult in protected places such as houses and other buildings, cracks or crevices in walls, doors, under windows

and around foundations, particularly on south and west exposures. In the spring, when tree buds open, small red eggs are laid on leaves and stones and in cracks and crevices in the bark of female boxelder trees. The eggs later hatch into young nymphs that are wingless and bright red in color with some black markings. These young bugs usually are found on low vegetation near boxelder trees until seeds are formed on the tree, which they then start to feed on.

Boxelder bugs are primarily a nuisance pest, annoying residents by crawling on exteriors and inside dwellings on warm fall and winter days. They also will stain draperies and other light-colored surfaces, and produce an unpleasant odor when crushed, but these are not major problems. They do not bite people, nor will they damage house plants.

Types of Control

The most permanent solution to the boxelder bug problem would be the complete removal of female boxelder trees from a neighborhood, although this may not be practical or desirable. Since boxelder bugs usually overwinter near the trees that they feed on, the removal of one or two problem trees may be of benefit to the homeowner. Infested trees also can be sprayed with carbaryl insecticide while the bugs are still concentrated on the trees, before they move into the house.

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When the bugs begin to congregate on dwelling exteriors, these areas also may be sprayed. Treat all resting and hiding places. Insecticides registered for treating building exteriors will give residual control, that is, treated surfaces will remain toxic to the insects for several days. Laundry detergents are cheap, safe and effective when applied directly to boxelder bugs. Drawbacks of detergent sprays are that they will kill only if they contact the insect directly and they may damage vegetation.

Screening or sealing cracks or other entrances into the dwelling is important because once boxelder bugs have entered the home, control becomes more difficult. A vacuum cleaner is useful for controlling bugs that have entered the house. Household insecticidal aerosols and many household spray cleaners also are effective when applied directly to individual insects. These measures will provide temporary relief only, because the boxelder bugs may continue to enter the home as they move about on warmer days throughout the fall, winter and early spring.

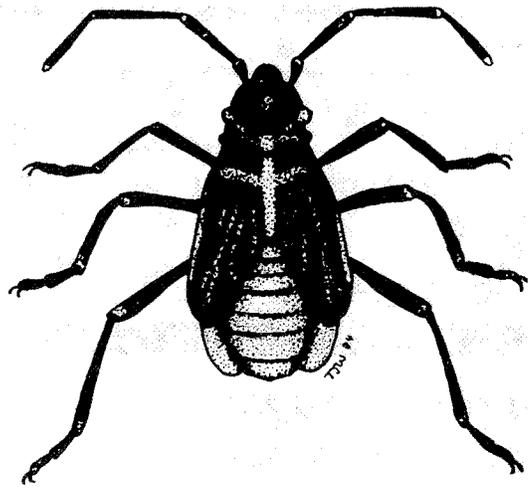


Figure 1: Immature boxelder bug.

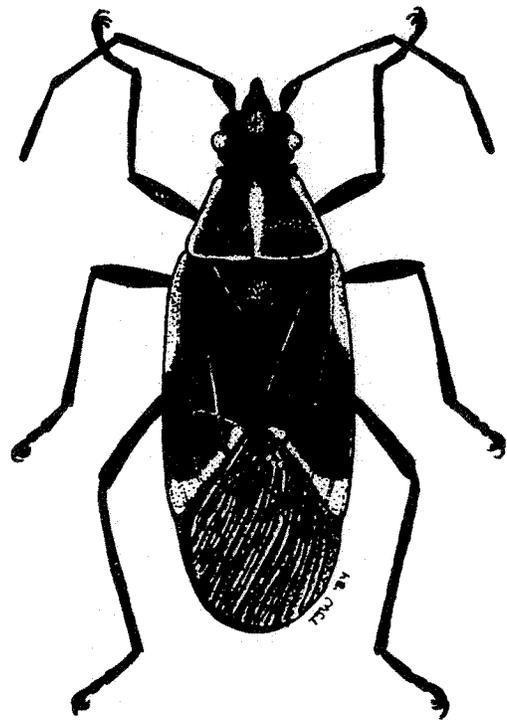


Figure 2: Mature boxelder bug.

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