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What the Heck Are These Red & Black Bugs?

Have you seen these guys on the side of your house, in your trees, or in your lawn lately? Don't panic, they're not there to eat you; although they can bite if handled carelessly. **They are boxelder bugs**, and, for the most part, they are just a nuisance. When the weather warms in late winter/early spring (i.e. this current crazy weather) these guys become active and emerge from their overwintering sites (e.g. exterior siding, attics, litter near foundations). This is because insects are cold-blooded and when the weather warms their metabolism increases and they become more active. When winter weather fades, female boxelder bugs lay their red eggs in the crevices of tree bark and on other objects near host plants such as boxelder and maple trees. They particularly like to lay their eggs on the seeds of female boxelder trees (samaras), usually noticed falling from the tree like an out of control helicopter. You may see large numbers of these guys on the south/southwest side of structures soaking in some sunshine. They do not harm buildings, but they may stain siding and walls with their fecal matter.

Identification of these bugs is fairly easy as they are about 1/2" long and 1/3" wide, blackish in color, and have red stripes seemingly outlining their body. They also have red veins in their wings and a red underside as well. Nymphs, or younger versions, look similar; the differences are they are smaller, without wings, and have a bright red color.

Getting rid of these nuisances is made possible through a multitude of control methods. **Number One: Host Removal.** you could remove the host trees, female boxelders, certain maples, and some fruit trees. If you'd rather not get rid of your gorgeous trees then perhaps option two, three, or four would be more preferred. **Number Two: Exclusion and Sanitation.** If these guys are in your house, you have an opening somewhere, it's that simple. They do not pass through walls like ghosts. However, if you have a gap between your wall (or foundation) and the door, window, cable line, or even the dryer exhaust vent, that could be ground zero. These access points are easily identified by light being seen between the surfaces. Seal them up by adding door sweeps, weather stripping, or caulk. Voids around pipes can be sealed with copper gauze (which won't rust) or expandable foam. All these weatherproofing methods will also save in energy costs. **Number Three: Vacuum Those Suckers Up.** A wet/dry vacuum with a soapy water mixture (one teaspoon of detergent per gallon of water) works rather well for collecting live bugs, whether they be lady beetles, stink bugs, or in this case, boxelder bugs. **Number Four: The Chemical Route.** Everyone has their own opinions on the use of chemicals (researched backed or not), but WHEN USING THE PRODUCT ACCORDING TO THE LABELED DIRECTIONS, most consumer chemicals are very safe. For example, some require personal protective equipment (PPE), some say to wash your hands thoroughly after use, some chemicals like soapy water (yes "soap" and water are chemicals) simply require a quick rinse of water. Your local lawn & garden store, farm or hardware store will most likely have a few insecticides with "Boxelder Bugs" listed on the label. Pick the bottle up, peel back the label, and find the section that says "Pests Controlled". If the bug you're trying to kill is listed, **FOLLOW THE LABEL DIRECTIONS** and have at it. A couple of chemicals approved for the elimination of boxelder bugs OUTSIDE that are found locally include "*Bayer Advanced Complete Insect Killer*", "*Spectracide Triazicide Insect Killer*" or any approved insecticide containing permethrin, bifenthrin or cyfluthrin with boxelder bugs listed on the label. Pay particular attention to the approved areas for application. Some list soil or turfgrass, some list trees and shrubs, while others are labeled for use on foundations or in and around buildings.

If you have any questions or need any more guidance on control of these or any other pests, contact the UT-TSU Extension Office at (423) 942-2656 and ask for Matt. Information for this article was derived from UT Publication SP341-H authored by Dr. Karen Vail, Dr. Frank Hale, and Dr. William Klingeman.