

*Cooler temperatures drive many insects indoors, including some exotic species*

## **Crawling bugs become uninvited winter house guests**

**November 4, 2009...** The welcome mat outside the front door of your home is probably not intended for all species of life. Nonetheless, many insects jump at the chance— or more likely crawl— to find safe harbor and warm temperatures as winter approaches. Homeowners and apartment dwellers in Oregon are beginning to notice the usual increased indoor activity of insects associated with this time of year, and the Oregon Department of Agriculture is hearing about it.

“We get calls throughout the year, but fall and winter is when we get most of them because there are several species of insects— both introduced and native— that enter homes in large numbers at this time,” says ODA entomologist Jim LaBonte. “They may be a nuisance but homeowners should not be overly concerned with these bugs. They are not a threat to humans, pets, or structures in any way, manner, or form.”

As the temperatures become lower and the days become shorter, these insects can aggregate on and in houses and other structures. In nature, they seek shelter for the winter under loose bark, in rock crevices, rotten logs, and leaf litter. Unfortunately, human residences also work just fine as winter shelters. When such insects enter residences in large numbers, they can become what entomologists refer to as AHPs— aggregative house pests.

Because AHPs are relatively small— some species are very tiny— they can easily enter through gaps under and around doors leading outside, poorly fitting windows, dryer vents, and other points of access into a residence. While almost all species of AHPs feed on plants, they do not feed while overwintering and should not harm house plants. These insects do not reproduce while inside residences.

Keeping these bugs out in the first place is probably the best choice for residents.

“The best thing to do is seal up points of access,” says LaBonte. “As far as bugs that have already entered the home, it depends on how many you have and your tolerance to these insects. You can escort them outside, flush them down the toilet, or dispose of them as you see fit. If there is a large number of them, a vacuum cleaner works well. We do not recommend calling a pest control company this time of year. First, these bugs are not harmful and you should be able to deal with them on your own. Secondly, your home is like an island in a sea of bugs. If you spray pesticides, you might get rid of the pests inside the house at that time, but it’s likely that others will just come in and take their place, especially if you haven’t sealed the accesses.”

After a few hard frosts, the outdoor bugs will likely become very inactive or will have already found shelter for the winter. In either case, they aren’t likely to come indoors.

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Several native species find their way into the home during winter, most commonly the box elder bug, which normally feeds on maple leaves. But in the past decade, a handful of exotic species have burst onto the scene in Oregon. In each case, these invaders characteristically aggregate and can show up in large numbers.

An unwanted exotic insect pest with an unsavory name and an unappealing scent first showed up in Portland in 2004, triggering a statewide alert asking citizens to help with detection. At the time, it was the first appearance of the brown marmorated stink bug, *Halyomorpha halys*, west of the Mississippi. Since then, several indoor detections of the insect have been made in the Portland area, many times in large numbers.

“It is known to be a pest in the sense that it aggregates in people’s homes in Asia, where it is native,” says LaBonte. “It’s doing the same thing in Oregon. It is also a significant crop pest in Asia. So we are very interested in finding out about any new reports of this species outside of the Portland metro area.”

The brown marmorated stink bug is native to Japan, China, Taiwan, and Korea. It was first found in the United States in 2001 in east coast states. While similar in looks to Oregon's native stink bugs, this one could be especially troubling in areas where it has no natural predators, parasites, or diseases to help control its population. Where the bug has become established in Asia and back east, it can enter homes by the thousands, which can be stressful and disturbing to residents.

As creepy and crawly as the stink bugs may be, they won't cause harm to humans although, as the name suggests, they can release an unpleasant odor when disturbed. The brown marmorated stink bug is probably a larger concern for agriculture.

"They have caused damage to the fruit harvest back east— especially to organic orchards," says LaBonte. "This insect has a very broad host range. It feeds on a number of plants and commodities ranging from fruit to soybeans and practically everything in between. It can achieve very large numbers and can do a lot of damage just feeding on fruit. It doesn't take much damage to render fruit essentially worthless in the marketplace."

Several other exotic species distantly related to the brown marmorated stink bug have also been reported as being AHPs in Oregon. These include the big-nosed bug, *Metopoplax ditomoides*, and the tuxedo bug, *Raglius alboacuminatus*, as well as two species without common names, *Rhyparochromis vulgaris* and *Xanthochilus saturnius*. None of these are known to be crop pests.

Homeowners will also notice a variety of spiders indoors this time of year. Harmless web-producing garden spiders, and various house or ground spiders are more noticeable in the winter months as they enjoy the warm confines of someone’s residence. These spiders are nothing to be concerned about, according to LaBonte.

So far, this appears to be a normal year of indoor bug activity in Oregon. LaBonte would not be surprised to see an increase in brown marmorated stink bug detections, especially in the Portland area. No matter the species, it's normal for you to share your home this winter with insects whether you like it or not.

For more information, contact Jim LaBonte at (503) 986-4749.