

What Are Those Little Crawly Beetles?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It shouldn't come as a surprise to you that insects get spring fever too. The weather starts to warm up, insects start coming out of hibernation and they start getting active looking for food and perhaps a mate! It doesn't seem to matter if the insects are inside a building or out in the wild, they all start to become active at this time of year.

There's a couple of notorious ones who are going to be getting real active as we move into April. The multicolored Asian lady beetle and the boxelder bug (a.k.a. Democrats or Republicans, depending on the community you grew up in) have been overwintering in many of your homes all winter long. As spring rolls around they break dormancy and get active, frequently gathering at windows. They are attracted to light and all they want to do is get outside so they can get on with their lives.

Spraying of insecticides in your house is actually fairly ineffective at trying to get rid of these pests. Using a vacuum is often the best approach to clean them up and of course, a good old fashioned fly swatter works wonders as well. The other alternative is to simply open the windows and let them out. As long as there aren't screens on the windows!

Another one that shows up regularly, and I've had several brought into my office in recent weeks for identification, are small little insects called dermestid beetles or simply dermestids. These are very small beetles 1/16 to 3/8 of an inch long. All you may see is a small insect the size of the head of a pin crawling across your counter or stuck in your sink. When you put them under magnification you can see that they have dense scales on their wing covers that look like short hairs, that are colored white, tan, brown, black and yellow, depending on the species. They can actually be quite pretty, for a tiny insect.

Dermestids go by a variety of common names including larder beetle, hide or leather beetles, carpet beetles, and khapra beetles. These rascals will feed on almost anything. It's probably safest to say that they will feed on dry substances of animal and plant origin, which pretty well covers a lot of stuff. They can be very serious pests of woolens, skins, furs, feathers and insect collections. Museums frequently maintain colonies of certain dermestids to finish cleaning meat off of bones for display skeletons. Again, these can be quite annoying and while the first instinct may be to reach for a can of insecticide, the best recourse may be to wash them down the sink.

The real problem is finding the source of the infestation. Often these insects are overwintering or just accidental invaders. For other more serious pests, you have to determine what their food source is and start dealing with that. Sometimes residual insecticidal sprays will help or are needed. But just taking a spray and pray approach when you don't really know what it is or where it's coming from is seldom successful.

One thing that rarely works are foggers or "bug bombs". These release an insecticidal mist or fog into a room that slowly settles and lands on any exposed surface. They will likely work on any insect flying in the room at the time or an insect that is on a surface where the insecticide lands. But the insecticide is not going to get under appliances or into cracks and crevices where most of these insects hide. Essentially, these products do very little good towards dealing with the insect pests you are trying to eliminate.