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Controlling Squash Bugs

Just when you think you have everything squared away in the garden you discover yet another problem, squash bugs! You can't ignore these insects; under suitable conditions they can quickly overwhelm your squash and pumpkin plants.

Squash bugs survive the winter by finding shelter in protected places such as under piles of garden debris, stacks of firewood, and in outbuildings. When spring arrives the insects that have successfully overwintered leave their hiding spots and search for squash and pumpkin plants to feed on. Shortly after spring feeding commences they initiate mating and egg-laying activity thus producing the year's first generation.

Squash bug egg clusters look like rows of widely-spaced, downsized BBs attached to the underside of the leaves, especially near the base of the large veins. However, egg clusters can be found almost anywhere on the plant. Freshly deposited eggs are orange-yellow, but later turn reddish-bronze just before the nymphs begin to hatch out.

Newly hatched nymphs are ashy-grey colored with conspicuous black legs. Nymphs must shed (molt) their skin (exoskeleton) several times as they grow bigger. There are typically five nymphal molts before the insect reaches maturity. On average, it takes about six weeks for the insects to grow from egg to egg-laying adult. This amount of time varies depending upon average temperature, relative humidity, and available food.

Adult squash bugs are about three-quarters of an inch long, have an elongated, shield-shape body with a flattened back, and are greyish-black in color. Their wings are held flat across their back but do not reach the tip of their tail. During her lifetime a female squash bug can lay up to 250 eggs, usually over a period of several weeks. The offspring produced from the overwintering bugs reach maturity during June and July. Under suitable conditions the first generation insects will also begin egg-laying activity, thus greatly increasing the number of squash bugs present later in the season.

The severity of crop damage is relative to the number of squash bugs present. For this reason, applying insecticide sprays early in the season is essential to prevent or significantly reduce damage. Newly hatched nymphs are the easiest to kill; however, adult squash bugs with hardened exoskeletons are highly resistant to insecticide spray.

Frequent inspection of the squash vines is essential for effective squash bug management. Begin insecticide applications when the first generation nymphs are observed. Oftentimes, a second and possibly third application of insecticide, each made 10 to 14 days apart, is necessary to achieve a suitable reduction in the number of damaging insects. Since squash bugs typically hide deep within the plant, insecticide spray should be applied with enough pressure and volume to ensure a thorough coverage.

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