

**STINK BUGS:** They are everywhere you don't want them to be

By JIM HOOK

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Researchers have fingered the pesky bugs dropping from your windows and doors as full-blown agricultural pests.

The brown marmorated stink bugs have spread across the Mid-Atlantic states in just a few years.

"There's no reason why they can't be almost anywhere in the U.S.," said Greg Krawczyk, Penn State entomologist. "They are spread by people. There's no way to stop them. They survive on many different plant species."

Like something from a Stephen King novel or a B movie from the 1950s, masses of the shield-shaped bugs climb warm walls. It's a behavior they developed in China for overwintering in the crevices of cliffs. American homes with cracks around doors and windows are a welcome substitute.

The stink bug is the exterminators' No. 1 pest call this time of year.

"We can kill them, but more can show up," said Bob Summers of Real-Kill Termite and Pest Control. "There's nothing out there to repel them."

The Penn State Cooperative Extension told fruit growers to spray to kill this season. It's the first time in at least 10 years the extension has advised using a broad-spectrum pesticide, according to Krawczyk.

Commercial sprays have been developed in recent years to target specific pests, allowing growers to spray less. Broad-spectrum pesticides destroy beneficial insects as well as harmful ones. The stink bug threatens to set back integrated pest management, according to Bruce McPheron, dean of Penn State's College of Agriculture.

Nobody predicted the alien bug's potential impact, he said. Pennsylvania didn't see that many until late last season when Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia experienced severe infestations, he said.

Some orchard blocks in the region had 40 to 60 percent of their fruit damaged by stink bugs, according to Krawczyk. The infestation varies from one block to another. Those bordering woodlands, housing developments or fields of soybean or corn typically get more stink bugs than blocks surrounded by other orchards.

"It does not affect all growers equally," he said. "I don't think we have a good number to say 'on average.'"

Research is just starting. Krawczyk is a member of the multi-state Brown Marmorated Stink Bug Working Group. The group met recently to identify basic priorities for research and rescue.

"We already have damage, and we don't have a program in place," said Krawczyk, whose fruit research office in Biglerville is at the core of Pennsylvania apple country. "We're in the rescue mode. We'll try to survive the next five years before the research community can provide some good advice."

Fruit growers, researchers and government agencies had lead time to react to the threat of plum pox and eradicated the disease from Pennsylvania stone-fruit orchards in eight years. Stink bugs gave them little warning.

The alien species was first identified in the U.S. in 2001, then pre-dated to around 1997 in Allentown. The critter has spread throughout Pennsylvania and into New York and New England. It's very common in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Virginia and West Virginia. Oregon and California have isolated populations. There's anecdotal evidence the bug is in North Carolina.

"This is not lab work," Krawczyk said. "We're talking about an insect. We can only do research when the insects are present. It's a very difficult situation. We will find a way. It will just take time."

The brown marmorated stink bug is about the size of a dime. Its shield-shaped back is a brownish gray and mottled with white and black.

A stink bug feeds on fruit, tomatoes, vegetables, leaves, ornamental trees, butterfly bushes, even soybeans.

"There's not a whole lot they don't eat," said Ray Eckhart, educator with the Penn State Extension in Franklin County.

It feeds like a mosquito by injecting its mouth part through the skin and sucking juice instead of blood. The bite leaves a mark on the skin of the fruit. The cells dry out down a quarter inch, and the fruit seals off the injury. No toxins, fungus or disease are associated with the feeding, Krawczyk said. An apple or peach that is bitten a number of times suffers "corking" or "cat facing."

The fruit is safe to eat, but unsightly. Blemished or distorted fruit can no longer be sold on the fresh market and is sent to processors or juicers where growers are paid seven to 10 times less for their crop, according to Krawczyk.

Home gardeners saw more damage from stink bugs this year than in previous years, according to Eckhart. People bring in an insect for identification, or damaged fruit and vegetables to find out what's eating them.

"It's definitely worse," said Kevin Tharp, owner of Pest Patrol. "It seems like calls are coming from all over the place this year."

He gets about eight to 10 calls a day. When stink bugs congregated last year on Bonita Wauls' house in Chambersburg, she called an exterminator to spray every other month. She thought they were under control until Thursday, when thousands appeared on the outside of her house.

"We can't go sit on the deck without being swooped in the face," Wauls said. "They're in our faces or hair and down our shirts. They're in every nook and cranny."

She's not alone. Penn State's stink bug website (<http://ento.psu.edu/extension/factsheets/brown-marmorated-stink-bug>); had 18,000 hits on Thursday, up from 1,000 hits a week earlier.

Because of the sheer number of the insects this year, Krawczyk suspects the population might have had at least two generations this year.