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Cluster Flies Invading Homes

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If a home or other building seems to have been invaded by hundreds of flies this fall, these are likely cluster flies. While a nuisance, they do not cause any damage or harm people or pets and they do not reproduce indoors.

To help identify them, cluster flies are slightly larger than a house fly, about three-sixteenth of an inch long, and have golden-yellow hairs on their bodies. If crushed, they smell like buckwheat honey.

As temperatures cool in the fall, these flies cluster on the south and west sides of buildings during the day for warmth. Many find their way indoors to overwinter, especially in attics or lofts.

They may seem to disappear and then reappear on warm winter days when they become active and make their way into living quarters. This is why homeowners assume they are breeding in the home but they are not.

A common question asked is where cluster flies come from and the answer is the soil as they feed on earthworms. Adult females lay eggs near openings of earthworm burrows. After hatching, larvae move into burrows and penetrate earthworms to feed. They pupate in soil and adult flies emerge.

In the fall, adult flies seek protected areas like tree cavities and buildings to overwinter. They invade attics and get under siding or around windows or other crevices on buildings. Many eventually congregate between walls and may enter rooms through openings in window frames and electrical fixtures.

The best way to manage cluster flies is to prevent them from entering buildings. Where possible, seal cracks and crevices with silicone or silicone-latex caulk and use weather stripping around doors. Areas to focus on are around windows, doors, siding, utility pipes, behind chimneys and underneath fascia. Repair any damaged screens.

Indoors, trap cluster flies with sticky traps or sweep and vacuum flies when active. They tend to be sluggish and are easy to swat. It is not recommended to treat wall voids with insecticides as the dead flies can attract other pests such as carpet beetles. These beetles will damage woolens and dried home goods.

If numerous flies are emerging inside of a home, try to locate the openings they are using, such as cracks behind baseboards, openings around windows, or ceiling lights. If feasible, seal or screen these openings. Do not use insecticide foggers as these will not control cluster flies and may not be safe.

While I've had the most questions about cluster flies, other incidental invaders that overwinter in our homes include multicolored Asian lady beetles, boxelder bugs, western conifer seed bugs and brown marmorated stink bugs. These too only overwinter and do not damage to structures or people. They are managed the same as cluster flies.

For information on indoor and other insects, go to the Douglas-Sarpy County website and click on Indoors.

<https://extension.unl.edu/statewide/douglas-sarpy/insects/>

Source: Nebraska and Penn State Extension

If a building seems to have been invaded by hundreds of small flies, these are likely cluster flies, which are 3/16 inch-long and have golden-yellow hairs. As temperatures cool in the fall, these flies cluster on the south and west sides of buildings during the day for warmth; then find their way indoors to overwinter. Cluster flies do not cause any damage and they do not reproduce indoors; even though their large numbers and seeing them off and on through the winter may make it appear so. A common question is where do cluster flies come from? They are unique in that the cluster fly larvae feeds on earthworms, and so adult flies emerge from soil or possibly compost piles that have earthworms. Caulking, weather stripping and fixing screens to exclude flies in the fall is an important management tactic. Indoors, trap cluster flies with sticky traps or seep and vacuum flies when active. <https://extension.unl.edu/statewide/douglas-sarpy/pdfs/ce/resources/ce-abl-cluster-fly.pdf>

Planting shrubs in containers for decoration is seen in garden magazines. If you've done this, know that container plants usually die during Nebraska winters, unless provided good winter protection. Containers lack the insulating effect soil provides to roots in ground plantings. Soil in containers can freeze solid along with roots, which kills plants. Providing winter protection for potted plants is a lot of work. Two methods are wrapping or "planting" containers. Planting is sinking the container into soil. Dig a large enough hole before the soil freezes. After sinking the container, fill in around the edges with soil and place 6 to 12 inches of wood chips over the soil. To wrap a container, water well, then make a cylinder with chicken wire around the plant and container. Fill the cage with leaves or straw; then wrap the outside of the cylinder with burlap. Wrapped containers will need to be watered during winter when soil is dry. <https://lancaster.unl.edu/winter-protection-potted-trees-and-shrubs-0>

Some spring blooming shrubs had a few flowers this fall. When a plant is stressed, or we have a summer with unusual weather like drought, blooms may appear on spring blooming landscape plants during fall. The stress factor is usually a hot, dry period but out of season blooming may be caused by other stresses. This year, it is likely heat and drought stress. I had reports of forsythia and lilac with a few blooms, but it can happen with ornamental pear, magnolia, Spirea or any spring blooming tree or shrub. Spring blooming plants form flower buds during summer so these plants already have their flower buds set and stress can trigger the buds to open. This fall flowering phenomenon is normally sparse and typically does not affect the amount of blooms the plant has the following spring. It is a sign plants are stressed. This year it is important to continue to provide water to dry soils until the soil freezes.

Tree leaves are a source of organic matter for compost piles, to till into garden soil, or to use as winter mulch over tender plants. And when left in flower and shrub borders, they provide overwintering protection for pollinators. According to research, leaves from different trees decompose at different rates, but the end product, or compost, is the same. And I have not heard of any types of leaves that should not be used for these purposes. Leathery leaves contain more lignin and take longer to decompose than soft or fine-textured leaves. Use leathery leaves as mulch. For tilling into garden soil or adding to compost piles, decomposition can be sped up by shredding or mowing leathery leaves first. If leaves are collected while mowing, grass clippings will be mixed in and this also speeds decomposition. Moisture is needed for decomposition to occur. If tree leaves are dry, moisten them slightly before adding to a compost pile.

Fairly common indoor insects are pantry pests. These are insects that infest dried food, especially seed-based foods like flour, pasta, cereal, nuts and more. There are different types of pantry pests including flour and carpet beetles, grain and bean weevils, and Indian meal moths. Other than the unpleasant thought of these insects infesting our food, most pantry pests cause no damage in the home. The only way to eliminate a pantry pest is to check all dried food products and discard infested items. Non-infested food needs to be stored in air tight and insect proof containers such as a jar with lid, or stored in a fridge or freezer. After removing infested items, vacuum or wipe food crumbs from pantries and cupboards. If pantry pests are present but no food items are infested, other sources to check are pet food, bird seed and rodent baits. Do not use insecticide products for pantry pest. It is unsafe and will not control pantry pests.