



Minute Pirate Bugs - Tiny Biters in Your Landscape

In late summer, an insect called the minute pirate bug makes its presence felt in landscapes. After working in my landscape last weekend, I have several mosquito-like, itching bites on my head, arms and legs attesting to the fact that they are very active right now!

Funny name, right? Well, minute pirate bugs are actually beneficial predators of landscape insects. Even though these insects are tiny, they are good predators of several types of damaging landscape insects including thrips, mites, whiteflies, leafhoppers, aphids, small caterpillars and eggs of many types of other insects. Virtually any soft-bodied insect of a similar size or smaller can be preyed on by minute pirate bugs. In fact, these insects can be purchased as a biological control agent from several commercial companies for natural greenhouse and garden pest control.

What Do They Look Like?

Adult minute pirate bugs are about 1/8 inch (2-3 mm) long, oval to triangular in shape, somewhat flattened and black with whitish markings on the back. Newly hatched pirate bugs are colorless, then darken to yellow as they mature; finally becoming dark brown. Adults have wings and can fly. There are multiple generations each year. Each insect completes its lifecycle in about 3 weeks during summer temperatures. The final generation overwinters each year as adults.

Both adults and immature insects have a piercing-sucking mouth. They use this short, blunt beak to impale their prey and sucking out the juices.

Of course, when you see one on your arm you won't be able to see the tiny white markings. All you'll see is a pepper-speck sized bit of dark-colored debris. You have to look really closely to identify it as an insect. At first glance, you might think it's a small black gnat. What will tip you off to the fact that this isn't a bit of dirt, is the pin-prick sting of their bite.

When a minute pirate bug lands on a person they probe your skin with their short beak to see if you're something good to eat. Their bite isn't as bad as being stung by a wasp, more like being stuck with a tiny pin. But still you can definitely feel it and since these insects are so small you wouldn't normally expect anything like that.



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People differ in their response to pirate bug bites. Bite reactions range from no reaction to having the area swell up like a mosquito bite. My bites are very itchy, even more than mosquito bites and have lasted for about 5-6 days.

But rest assured, minute pirate bugs do not feed on blood, inject a venom, or transmit diseases.

To learn about a similar insect, the hackberry lace bug, visit Tiny Biting Bugs, <https://lancaster.unl.edu/pest/resources/bitingbugs.shtml>, from Nebraska Extension.

Protecting Yourself

Minute pirate bugs will be active on warm, sunny days until we've had several hard freezes and cold weather sets in for good. During summer, minute pirate bugs are abundant in crop fields, woodlands, gardens and landscapes. It isn't until late summer that they begin the disagreeable behavior of biting humans.

It is not practical to eliminate minute pirate bugs from your landscape. Spraying your trees and lawn, or around your house won't help. Keep in mind this problem is temporary and variable from year to year, but more importantly these are beneficial predators.

Because pirate bugs are not attracted to carbon dioxide like mosquitoes, insect repellents are not effective against them.

So when you're outside, especially near or under trees, protect yourself by covering your skin. Wear long-sleeved shirts, long pants, with shoes and socks. Dark-color clothing may also make you less attractive.

Your Suggestions are Welcome!

Is there a lawn and gardening topic you would like to learn more about? Sarah Browning is an Extension Educator with Nebraska Extension and can be contacted by phone at (402) 441-7180: by mail at 444 Cherrycreek Road, Lincoln, NE 68528: or by e-mail at sarah.browning@unl.edu.

Image - [John Ruberson, Kansas State University, Bugwood.org](#). Adult minute pirate bug feeding on insect egg.

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