



Squash Bugs in the Garden

If you've ever grown your own squash or pumpkins, you have probably encountered squash bugs. If you're new to gardening, allow me to introduce you to a common pest in Nebraska gardens. Squash bugs are mottled brown in color, with a slightly flattened body. Both the adults and the immature bugs pierce plant leaves and stems with their mouth and suck out the plant juices. Damaged plants will yellow, then brown, wilt, and if there is a large squash bug population, die as a result of the feeding.

Adult squash bugs overwinter in the garden in plant debris, especially vines left in the garden. When they emerge in the spring, they mate, and the female lays her eggs on the underside of leaves. Their first choice of food is winter squash, but other vegetables in the cucurbit family are vulnerable to attack. These include melons, pumpkin and cucumber. When the eggs hatch, nymphs emerge and begin feeding. A nymph is a small, immature version of the adult. Nymphs feed and grow through several stages before they reach adulthood. Unfortunately, both adult and nymph squash bugs feed on cucurbits and cause damage.

The best defense against a squash bug infestation is early detection. They should beginning to become active now, once the vining crops they prefer begin to grow. Female squash bugs lay her eggs in clusters on the underside of the vine leaves, usually between the veins of the leaf. The eggs are oval in shape, and a rusty reddish brown in color. If you see these eggs, destroy them immediately! Control gets harder as the insects grow.

When the eggs hatch the nymphs emerge, they can vary in color from dark red to green to gray, depending on their stage of maturity. Nymphs and adults can move very fast when disturbed, complicating their control. Only one generation develops each year, but at overlapping intervals, so you can often find eggs, nymphs, and adults on the same plant.

As for their control, early detection and destruction of the eggs can't be overstated. It is so much easier to squish some eggs than it is to spray chemical on the underside of plant leaves onto moving targets! There has been a lot of research regarding trap crops – planting squash plants such as 'Mother Hubbard' that they really go for so they will destroy those plants, instead of the choice vines you want to keep. If you plant trap crops, if or when the pest takes up residence on the target plant, either spray those vines with a target insecticide, or remove the plants altogether.

As for chemical control, neem oil diatomaceous earth, and horticultural soaps are effective on young nymphs. Unfortunately the stronger chemicals labeled for squash bug control such as carbaryl (Sevin), are also very damaging to the pollinators you need to produce the fruit in the first place. Chemical control is often not as effective as needed because of the squash bug's tendency to stay on the underside of the leaves. Good chemical coverage is difficult because of this, and often leaves behind many live squash bugs.

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