

STINKBUGS

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August 2000

Stinkbugs have piercing and sucking mouthparts, are predators of other bugs, and have glands that produce an odor when threatened. In fact, they will squirt the stinky stuff at you as they make their escape.

I may as well get it out in the open right away: I HATE STINKBUGS! I hate them more than any other bug I've ever known—well, I guess to be truthful that they are part of my “big three” which includes mealy bugs and cockroaches. Their piercing and sucking mouths create those horrible little cream-colored circles on my cactus that never go away. They inject a toxin while feeding that causes the yellow spots. Through the years, they seem to know which plant I am particularly admiring, choosing that one for their egg laying that year. I diligently check my plants for them daily when the temperatures start heating up. Often times they have already left for good when the yellow marks appear in great numbers. They also love to suck out the juices of tomatoes.

Eggs are barrel shaped, laid in clusters of usually ten or more on leaf surfaces and under spines. As the eggs hatch, the young (as well as the adults) then suck out the juices from my plants leaving those nasty permanent marks. I suspect that these punctures may provide an avenue for bacteria and viruses to enter too. In my potted plants and for some of the larger less lethal landscape plants, I've developed a strategy to kill the nasty things. (I don't like using pesticides.)

Using a large pair of blunt tweezers, I steady one hand with the other, and then slowly approach the ¾” long adults head on. Oddly, they just sit there and watch me coming. Then, I grab them with the tweezers and employ the stomp method. Their escape strategy, if I approach too fast, is to simply drop quickly to the ground or into the plant. The adults can also fly away. Then, I'm unable to get at them. So a slow and steady approach leads to success. If I squish them with the tweezers, it's at this moment that I'm reminded why they are called stink bugs. You see, they shoot a powerful stream of stinky stuff right at me, one time landing the green goo right on my glasses. Under a thick shoe sole, their defense mechanism has no effect. That way I know that they are dead and not faking. They can be sneaky and can fly away or hobble away with one less leg. I also find that where there is one adult, there is usually always another. If they escape by dropping or flying away, I know that they'll be back in 5-10 minutes. Patience brings me success.

The babies, called nymphs, require a little different strategy as they are more bashful, and are usually (but not always) found in more densely spined plants. They are round, a bright green with reddish antenna held high over their heads. They can be observed early in the morning when the first shafts of sunlight are gently caressing the plants. It seems as though they are warming themselves or doing some kind of sunrise ceremony. Anyway, they line up on the edge of a cactus pad or, at the top and edges of plants, and seem to be smiling enjoying the morning their little heads bobbing around. Probably,

they are grateful to be alive one more day or, are remembering the great feast they had sucking the juices out of my plants. Gently blowing on the plants seems to reassure them and make them move so they reveal themselves—maybe they think it's mom coming back for a visit. I use the blunt tweezer method, but quickly substitute the squashing method when needed using the tip of the tweezers. They can quickly escape, falling into the plant (they are wingless until mature). Then, I go for the "killing stick." A small, blunt twig especially selected for the purpose (I don't want to pierce the plant to kill the bug). Jabbing repeatedly at the soil, I can usually squish them. If not, after 5-10 minutes they are back up on the plant ready for another round of "escape the tweezers." I'm wise to their tactics, and can usually kill them all in one round of the game.

If this fails, I slowly water the plant. Not being swimmers, they crawl back up on the plant, then, squish, I've got 'em. In fact, if you notice the telltale marks on your plants announcing their presence, try this method. They always show themselves. With a heavy infestation, I have used Malathion with great success, but not all cactus and succulent plants will survive a drenching with this chemical.

If any one has any better solutions in dealing with stinkbugs, I sure would like to know about them.