

**COASTAL GARDENER**

**Franklin Laemmlen, Ph.D.**

**Q:** On warm days I have a large number of red and black bugs “sunning” themselves on the wall of my house. What are they? From where are they coming?

**A:** The bugs you describe could be milkweed bugs or boxelder bugs. As the names imply, milkweed bugs feed on milkweed and may feed occasionally on other forage or herbaceous plants. Boxelder bugs feed primarily on boxelder. There are usually two generations of these insects per year. In the fall adult and late instar nymphs migrate in search of places to spend the winter. They often congregate in large numbers in homes and other buildings where they will hide in cracks and crevices. During the winter on warm days, they may come out of hiding and sun themselves on building walls. This is the collection of insects you have recently seen! In the spring they will disperse into the fields and trees from where they came. Adults will lay eggs on preferred host plants where nymphs will feed, and the life cycle begins again.

Both milkweed bugs and boxelder bugs cause little if any damage to landscape and garden plants other than milkweed and boxelder. Thus control is seldom necessary. Boxelder bugs feed only on boxelder and primarily on female or pod bearing boxelder. Therefore, avoid planting a female boxelder in your landscape or remove the one you already have. Also both these insects can be easily controlled with an insecticide containing either malathion or carbaryl.

P.S. There are other insects that also seek shelter for winter hibernation, and they will congregate in much the same way as described above. These include elm leaf beetles and lady bird beetles.

**Author’s Notes:** If your apricot, peach, nectarine, cherry or plum tree had fruit with a bad case of brown rot last year, **NOW** is the time to apply the first brown rot control spray. Research has shown that the spores of the brown rot fungus are dispersed in large numbers during spring rainy weather. The spores infect blossoms and young fruit, then go dormant until the fruit ripens, at which time the fungus again becomes active and causes fruit rot. Now, when your tree is in 75% to 90% bloom, is the best time to apply

preventive sprays of copper, triforine or chlorothalonil. Apply a second brown rot spray when the fruit is about one-fourth inch in diameter.

Even with the continued cool weather, now is the time to start checking your roses and other flowers for aphids. Aphids are often hard to detect, but the presence of honeydew (shiny, sticky liquid) on leaf surfaces is an indication that insects which suck plant sap are present. Aphids, whiteflies, mealybugs, scale insects and psyllid populations can be more easily controlled if caught in the early stages of the infestation. Insecticides such as narrow range oil (summer oil), insecticidal soap, imidacloprid, pyrethroid materials, cinnamaldehyde, carbaryl and pyrethrins can be used for aphid and other sucking insect control. Read the product label for dosage and treatment interval instructions. Follow these label directions for best results.

Send your landscape and garden questions to: **The Coastal Gardener, 624-A West Foster Road, Santa Maria, CA 93455.**