HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

BED BUGS

It's something that no one wants to think about. However, living near one of the most popular tourist destinations, it is something that is quite common. This "something" is bed bugs (Cimex lectularius). With people visiting and moving to Central Florida from all over the country and the world, bed bugs can be an unwelcome hitchhiker in their luggage.

The majority of the bed bugs diet is the blood of humans, but they can also suck blood from other animals, such as birds, bats, and rodents. They are most actively feeding at night when people are asleep. As the bed bugs feed, they inject a fluid into the wound that often causes the skin to itch and become swollen. Of course, scratching these sores can lead to infection. The good news is that bed bugs are not known to transmit any human diseases.

The adult bed bugs are about 1/4 inch long, flat, oval in shape, and have no wings. They are generally brown in color except after they feed. Once they feed on blood, their body becomes swollen and the color changes to dark red. The young bed bugs are lighter in color and similar in shape to the adult except they are much smaller.

Bed bugs are carried into homes by infested clothes, suitcases, second-hand beds, furniture, and bedding, or by people. They are not just found in beds. During the day, bed bugs hide in cracks and outlets in the walls, behind baseboards, wallpaper and pictures, between bed joints and slats, around the tufts of mattresses and in bed linens. They have a sweetish, foul odor caused by an oily liquid they emit. This odor is very noticeable when a room is infested with these pesky insects.

Bed bugs cannot be controlled until the location where they are living is located. Inspect all of the locations as mentioned above including the other less conspicuous places such as dressers, carpeting, and drapery. Remember, just because they are bed bugs, doesn't mean they can't feed and live in other places, such as a couches or recliners. Once the bed bugs are found, there are several different methods that may be used to combat them.

A non-chemical approach would be to vacuum all visible bed bugs from the mattresses and box springs and their other known harborages. Ensure the vacuum bag is removed, sealed, and disposed of off premises immediately after vacuuming. Steam cleaning can also be a nontoxic control method, paying particular attention to the seams and tufts of the mattress. After vacuuming and steam cleaning, seal the mattress and box springs in plastic mattress bags to ensure any missed bed bugs do not attempt to reestablish themselves. Bed linens and draperies can be dry cleaned or washed with a detergent and borax additive in hot water. Insecticides can also be used to provide instant results. A number of pesticides are available for use.

Pesticides, available in dusts and sprays, can be used in cracks and crevices and other areas that are difficult to reach. Dusts are also preferred over sprays when treating the tufts, folds, and sleeping surfaces of mattresses. Residual sprays should be applied to the bed frame and the non-sleeping surfaces of mattresses. Dresser drawers should be removed and turned upside down, ensuring all surfaces are sprayed. Spray woodwork and all walls at least 2 feet above the floor for the entire perimeter of the room.

Aerosol insecticides can also be used to kill the bed bugs on contact when harborages are found. Aerosols are also preferred when treating sensitive materials such as clothing or stuffed animals. These items should be placed into a plastic garbage bag or a closet, which is also likely to be infested. Spray aerosol into the closet or bag and seal for 10-15 minutes. With severe infestations, contact a certified pest control company to combat the bed bugs for you.
Let's all hope that we never have to combat these blood-sucking insects, but if you do, remember they can infest almost anything anywhere. Information for this article was taken from the University of Florida/IFAS publication "Bed Bugs and Blood-Sucking Conenose". For more information on bed bugs, a free copy of this publication, or for answers to gardening questions, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls and visits Monday thru Friday from 10am to 2pm.

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Date: April 15th, 2007