



The Back Yard Gardener August 15, 2019

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“The Kissing Bug”

Hello Mid-Ohio Valley farmers and gardeners! I hope everyone is enjoying the “fruits of their labor” from the garden. There is nothing better than the taste of produce straight from the home garden. This weekend also marks the 39th annual WV Honey Festival in City Park. The festival will be buzzing with activities and promotes honey and the importance of the honeybee to the Mountain State.

A few tips for the garden in August. Make sure to pick summer squash and zucchini every day or every other day to keep plants producing and to harvest great quality vegetables that are not over mature. August can be dry so if you need to water plants water at the root level. Wetting the leaves can lead to fungal issues.

Leafy greens such as lettuce, spinach, collards, kale and mustard can all be started by seed this month. If the soil is dry, wait until after a rain to plant or water seeds wells to get good germination. Finally, watch for the second generation of fall webworm in late August/early September. Remove webs that enclose branches and destroy or spray with an appropriate insecticide. Finally, a word on mowing height. We typically experience a hot and dry August so keeping mowing heights at least three inches will provide some shade and prevent lawn soil from drying out so severely.

In the last few years there has been some sensational journalism going on about the bloodsucking conenose or “kissing bug” and how it transmits the deadly Chagas disease. In the summer of 2018 a girl in Delaware was bitten on the face by a kissing bug. Fortunately, the kissing bug that bit the girl tested negative for the Chagas disease.

Usually found in the Southern States, these triatomine insects have been moving into the north. Yes, it is true the kissing bug has been found here in West Virginia for decades but they are rare and the actual risk of contracting the disease here in the Mid-Ohio Valley is extremely low.

Scientists know that the main species of kissing bug responsible for transmitting Chagas disease is rarely found in the United States. This insect is adapted for more tropical climates such as South and Central America where it is a common pest. It only becomes a problem when it enters the homes and reproduces in large numbers. There are actually ten species

of kissing bugs found in the U.S., typically in the southern states. Only one, the eastern bloodsucking conenose would most likely be found here in the Mountain state.

Kissing bugs are about a half-inch long with a flat abdomen with orange-red to yellowish horizontal markings. They belong to a family of insects that have a characteristically long, slender head with a very sharp rostrum or beak that is normally tucked underneath the head. This beak is a modified mouthpart that the kissing bug uses to pierce and suck fluids out of their prey.

If you have ever seen a boxelder bug, the kissing bug look very similar and can be easily confused for one. Boxelder bugs are especially common during the fall because they love to sneak in homes and hang out all winter.

Actually, the kissing bug is officially referred to as the bloodsucking conenose bug. This pest is native to Central and South America as well as Mexico and is much more prevalent there. Insects in the kissing bug group called *Triatoma* are unique because they feed on the blood of mammals (sometimes humans). These bugs are active and feed at night, so it is rare to see one during the day. They typically inhabit mammal burrows or hide in brush piles, under tree bark, or under rocks.

Outdoor pet kennels and rodent dens are common hiding places. However, the adults are attracted to artificial lights during the summer and early fall. Once they find house lights, they sometimes take up residence in furniture or in the house structure. If they find food sources, they can lay eggs and reproduce.

Not all kissing bugs behave exactly the same but one particular species will transmit Chagas disease. Typically, if these kissing bugs reside in a home they are active at night and bite someone most often near the face and lips which is why it is called a kissing bug. However, after feeding they deposit fecal matter on the skin.

Usually the person will become infected by itching or scratching and smear the pathogen into his or her mouth or nose or into the open wound created by the bite. Chagas disease is a chronic illness caused by a protozoan parasite (*Trypanosoma cruzi*) that is similar to the one that causes African sleeping sickness.

Let me put your mind at ease. Scientists from the Center for Disease Control say the probability of someone contracting Chagas disease in the United States is extremely low. Triatomines or kissing bugs has been present throughout much of the US for many years without increased disease occurring. Only six cases of Chagas disease have ever been documented in the entire US.

In most cases our homes here in the U.S. are built with windows, walls, and doors that keep most insects out. We also typically normally use air conditioning so that we can keep doors and windows closed or screened, especially at night when lights are on.

Furthermore, and most importantly only a small percentage of these kissing bugs carry the parasite that causes Chagas disease. In addition, to become infected the kissing bug must

have fed upon a rodent or another host animal that already has the protozoan parasite in its blood. So even if a kissing bug finds a way inside your house, it still must also have fed on an infected mammal host to become infected. Finally, the parasite itself also has a low probability of survival.

More information is available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at their Chagas webpage at <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/chagas/index.html> or go to the Kansas School Naturalist "Kissing Bugs in the U.S. at <https://www.emporia.edu/ksn/v57n2-spring2011>. Contact me at the Wood County WVU Extension Office 304-424-1960 or e-mail me at jj.barrett@mail.wvu.edu with questions. Good Luck and Happy Gardening!