Squash Their Attack

Squash are one of the easiest vegetables to grow in your home garden. They are also one of the first to show signs of insect damage during the season. It always amazes me how quickly a garden can go from green and lush to yellow and sickly. If you have not seen any of these little pesky, creatures yet, count yourself lucky. Squash bugs are on the prowl.

Squash bugs overwinter in and around the garden finding hiding places under leaves and debris. They appear in the spring and begin their attack on our beautiful squash plants. Adults feed on the leaves and the fruit of the plant with their piercing sucking mouthparts. They inject a toxin that turns the leaves yellow then the plants wilt and die.

Squash bugs are about 5/8” long and varying shades of brown. They have a shield shaped hard-shelled body. Squash bugs are relative to stinkbugs, so beware when you give them a squish! Soon after emerging, the adults mate and lay eggs on the underside of the leaves. The eggs are football shaped and a yellow orange color. They are most often found in the corners or leaf veins. 10 to 14 days later, the nymphs will emerge. Nymphs are initially a green color turning gray as they age. In our area, there may be two entire generations of squash bugs in one season.

While squash bugs are easily spotted and identified in the garden, they are much harder to eradicate. The labor intensive but effective approach is to pluck off the adults and nymphs and drown them in a bucket of soapy water. If you are a brave soul, you can squish them between your fingers. You will also need to carefully scratch off and squash any eggs that you find. Beware… squash bugs are spry little insects! Upon sight of you or your squishing tool, they will move quickly to the opposite side of the leaf or stem. So, you must be prepared for battle! My advice is to wear gloves and be quick.

If you are not gaining ground with basic control measures, it may be time to think about using chemical insecticides. Insecticides are only effective against the vulnerable nymph stage of the squash bug, so they should be applied as soon as eggs are spotted. For those of you following organic practices, Rotenone is one choice you can utilize. Synthetic pesticide with one of the following active ingredients are also effective against squash bug nymphs: esfenvalerate, permethrin or bifenthrin. Sprays should cover then entire backside of all leaves and repeated as directed on the label as long as eggs and nymphs are visible.

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While the battle may rage all season long, it is truly worth it to be able to have your own homegrown squash on your dinner table. Rest assured you are not alone. Squash bugs have taken up residence in my garden too. So get out there, drown them, squish them, or spray them away. Whatever you do, do not let the squash bug prevail!

If you have any questions, comments, or topics you would like me to write about, send me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, an E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu or call me at 910-671-3276. To learn more about Extension visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center’s website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu. Happy gardening!