

Providing Leadership in Environmental Entomology

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Pest Myths

We live in the information age. Unfortunately, not all of the information we get is credible or true. The Extension Entomologists in the Clemson University Entomology Department field many calls each year about insects, spiders and related critters. Among those calls are questions and beliefs about some well-entrenched myths. The following are some top pest myths you may have heard and we get asked about.

Myth 1. Grand daddy longlegs "spiders" are extremely poisonous. False. First, grand daddy longlegs are not spiders. They are related to them, but they are not true spiders. Grand daddy longlegs are more correctly called harvestmen. True spiders are hunters and have venom. Harvestmen are scavengers and do not have venom. So, unless you are a very tiny insect or some type of organic goo, you have nothing to fear from the harvestman lurking by your garage door.

Myth 2. Chiggers burrow under skin and suck your blood. False. Contrary to popular belief, chiggers do not burrow into the skin nor do they feed on blood. These immature mites pierce skin around hair follicles



These spots are the result of chigger bites. The chiggers are already gone. They are not under the skin.

and release a skin dissolving saliva. Chiggers then feed on the resulting liquid. On humans, chiggers often accumulate in areas where clothing is tight, such as a belt at the waist or socks around the ankle. By the time you feel itching and see a red dot on your skin, it is not the chigger but your skin's reaction to the chigger. By then, the chigger is probably gone, so don't start digging at yourself to "get it out" or painting the spots with nail polish to suffocate the phantom chigger. Take a warm, soapy shower and use soothing skin creams to relieve the itch. The next time you go out where chiggers live, use repellents or protective clothing to keep them from biting you.

Myth 3. Paper mites in an office will fly or jump and bite people. False. First, there is no such thing as a paper mite. Second, mites cannot fly or jump. The myth of paper mites probably is related to a phenomena know as cable mite dermatitis. The fictitious "cable mite" term was coined by entomologists asked to investigate "mites" attacking workers in a laboratory. The symptoms started after an electrical cable was installed in the ceiling of the lab. Particulate matter was dislodged from insulation during the installation and got into the ventilating system. The dust or "cable mites" was then circulating throughout the lab, irritating the occupants. When they removed the dust, the dermatitis that the workers experienced, ceased. If you think mites are biting you, collect them, bring them to your county Extension office and have them identified. What you think may be a mite, might not.

Myth 4. Brown recluse spiders are very common and bite many people in South Carolina. False. Just like every snake is a poisonous snake for some folks, every spider is a brown recluse for others. Misidentifying spiders as brown recluse is common for pest control professionals and medical doctors. Over the last ten years, of all the spiders sent to Clemson that people thought were brown recluse, were not! Unfortunately, many spiders look like brown recluse, but they do not have the same dangerous venom. In fact, South Carolina is not in the native range for the brown recluse. So the next time you think you see a brown recluse, think again. It is probably one of the other 3,000 species of spiders known to live in the United States.

Myth 5. Palmetto bugs are not cockroaches. False. They are. There are more than 15 species of cockroaches in South Carolina. However, only a few species may be pests in your home. In South Carolina, people like to call smokybrown cockroaches, palmetto bugs. Adult smokybrowns are usually one to 1.5 inches in length and as the name implies, smoky-brown in color. The young smokybrowns are about 3/8 inch long, with black bodies and white marking on the



Smokybrown cockroach adults are often called Palmetto bugs.

middle of their bodies and tips of their antennae. As they grow, they turn a mahogany color before becoming smoky-brown adults.

Adult smokybrowns are very mobile and can live in a variety of

places including mulch, log piles, thick vegetation and gutters around roofs. Along the coast they are often found in trees, especially live oaks and palmettos. In your home, they can reside from the attic to the crawl space.

If you have a mysterious bug, crawling in your home, try to figure out what it is before you spray it with bug spray. It may just be a hapless, harmless creature that wandered in. If you think you've been bitten by a dangerous spider or irritating mite, try to collect the culprit and see your medical doctor. To identify other pests, your county Extension office is a great place to go. Your agents will give you the straight facts and identify the "bug" if possible. If your county agents can't identify your bugs, they'll send them to Clemson University for analysis. There is a \$10.00

charge for this service. To find the number of your local Extension office, look under the county office listings in the phone book and then look for Clemson University Cooperative Extension.

For other publications in our Entomology Insect Information Series visit our web site at <http://www.clemson.edu/esps>.

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