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Insects from Firewood

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There is nothing like a roaring fire to take the chill out of the house and your bones on a cold, winter's day. Sometimes when firewood is brought into the house, uninvited guests come in as well. A number of insects call trees and logs home. Fortunately, the creatures that live in logs or under the bark will not harm you or your home.

Several species of beetles are attracted to stressed or dying trees. Bark beetles attack trees that are in poor health. The females lay eggs just under the bark. When the larvae hatch out, they create tunnels between the bark and sapwood as they grow and feed. After the larvae pupate, adult bark beetles emerge. Depending on the species of bark beetle, there may be more than one generation per year. Bark beetles are quite small from 1/16 to 1/8 inch in length and often attack trees in groups so there may be large numbers of beetles in infected trees.

Long-horned beetles are named for their very long antennae. These beetles are also attracted to freshly cut or dying trees. They have a similar life cycle to bark beetles except the large, round headed larvae may spend 1 to 3 years tunneling through the wood before turning into an adult.

Metallic wood-boring beetles, like the emerald ash borer, are usually small but often have a metallic sheen and for that reason are sometimes referred to as jewel beetles. They also lay eggs under the bark and the larvae feed on the wood. It may take 1 to 2 years to complete its life cycle.

Aside from borers living inside the logs, there can be a number of other insects seeking refuge from cold winter temperatures that hide under loose bark. Millipedes, pillbugs and the like may think they found an ideal spot to overwinter until you bring them into your warm home.

To minimize bringing nuisance insects into the house the best thing you can do is simply to bring in wood when you are planning to burn it. Typically, it would take 1 to 2 days for any insects to warm up and become active so plan accordingly.

Ideally, firewood should be stored outdoors and off the ground. This can help keep some ground dwelling creatures from seeking refuge in woodpiles. Keeping the logs off the ground also aids in drying the wood. Of course, this will not affect the boring insects that are inside the cut wood. They are most often found in dying and recently deceased trees but if the wood is allowed to season for 6 months to two years depending on the species of tree, most of the beetles will have exited it before you use it in your fireplace.

Never store wood on the ground next to your house or other building as you may be providing a home or food for termites or carpenter ants. Termites nest in the ground but could feed on your logs. They create mud tunnels to get from their nest to their food source. If you find that the firewood stacked against your house has a termite infestation, seek a professional pest control operator to examine your house for damage.

Carpenter ants do not feed on wood but they excavate soft, water damaged wood for their home. They come out at night to look for food. Piles of wood stacked on the ground near homes may have some water-damaged logs at the bottom. These could be attractive to carpenter ants. While they might enter your home looking for food, they typically only create nests in areas with water-damaged wood. Piles of sawdust are often a sign that something is amiss.

We occasionally get questions about spraying the firewood with some sort of insecticide. This is not recommended because of two reasons. First, it would be highly unlikely that the insecticide could penetrate into the wood where any boring insects might be. And secondly, it could be a health hazard when handling or burning wood laden with pesticides.

If insect pests do come in with your firewood, don't be alarmed. Just vacuum or sweep it up and discard it or catch and release.

Once again, the UConn Home & Garden Education Center will be at the CT Flower and Garden Show, February 22 – 25 at the Convention Center in Hartford. Bring ½ cup of soil for a free pH test and your garden questions to be answered by staff and Master Gardener volunteers.

If you need to have an insect identified or have questions on insects found in firewood or other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.