

## Leaffooted Bugs, Stinkbugs, and Spider Mites

It has been an excellent year for tomato and peach production, unfortunately leaffooted bugs, stinkbugs and spider mites are also taking advantage of the bountiful production.

Leaffooted bugs are up to 1 inch long and have the look of an armored vehicle. They buzz up in large numbers like primitive drones from your peach trees and tomato plants when you approach them. Leaffooted bugs are not as fierce as they look and sound, but they are also not the most pleasant insect to come into contact within your garden.

Leaffooted bugs suck juices from plants and especially the fruit. Like other related stinkbugs they inject digestive juices into the fruit and then harvest the resultant “stew”. The damage is not as severe as other stinkbugs because the leaffooted bugs concentrate on fruit that is nearly ripe. You get some discoloration but not as much scar tissue or bitter taste as from the regular stink bugs.

Because of their size and mobility leaffooted bugs are not easy to control with insecticides. Some gardeners mention pyrethrum as an option for the nymphs but for the adults, malathion and Sevin are the effective options. If you use one of those insecticides, make sure you note and adhere to the required time between spraying and harvesting the fruit.

Some gardeners rely on handpicking the leaffooted bugs. It even seems to work well to use a handheld portable vacuum cleaner to reduce the numbers of the pests. The fact that the damage to the nearly mature fruit is not as bad as regular stink bugs gives gardeners some room to tolerate the presence of a small number of the pests.

If leaffooted bugs look like armored drones, the regular stinkbugs are barges, or maybe flying saucers? Stink bugs take advantage of the moist weather and lush weed cover to produce large number of nymphs and adults. Their presence is usually not as noticeable as the leaffooted bugs but the damage they do is often worse because they attack and inject their digestive juices in the fruit from early in its development. Instead of a slightly discolored peach or tomato, the stink bug damaged fruit is usually lumpy and scarred. In blackberries there is a bitter taste that lingers.

Stink bugs are the main reason we recommend that peaches are sprayed every week with malathion or Sevin after petal drop if you want blemish- free fruit.

If leaffooted bugs and stinkbugs aren't enough, gardeners are reporting that spider mites are also busy feeding on tomatoes. With high temperatures, spider mite populations grow very fast. The small spider like pests suck the juices from the underside of the tomato foliage to the point that the leaves fade and look dusty, and eventually will have webs visible.

You can use a preventative spray of 2 tablespoons of seaweed extract in 1 gallon of water sprayed under the leaves weekly through the spring, but once the temperatures warm and spider mite population increase, there is no effective way to reverse the mite expansion or stop the damage. Spider mites are one of the reasons we have 2 tomato seasons in Central Texas. The most effective treatment for spider mite infested plants seems to be to harvest all the fruit and pull the spring plants in late June or early July. Include carefully discarding the spider mite infested plants in a garbage sack as part of the process.

It is best not to drop the mature spider mites from the old plants so they can infest the new fall planting.  
Plant new short-season tomato transplants at the end of July.