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# VIRGINIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

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**VIRGINIA  
STATE**

No. 173  
FEBRUARY 4, 1988

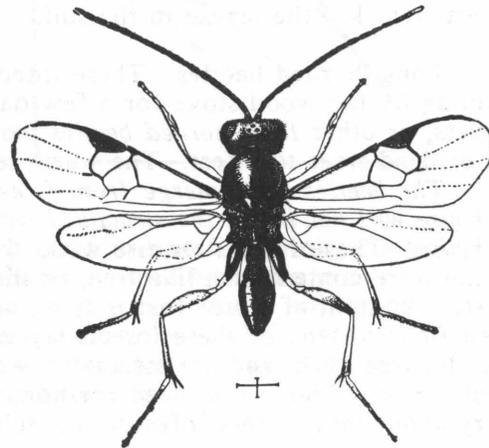


## WINTER WORRIES

## INSECT NOTES

There are a few insects and spiders that appear in houses in the winter months, and cause concern among homeowners. During this time many people are somewhat "home-bound", and may notice the presence of insects and spiders in their house more than they would during the summer. Some of the most common causes of the "winter worries" are: parasitic wasps, long-horned beetles, fungus gnats, and window spiders. In most cases these pests can be controlled or eliminated without the use of insecticides.

**Parasitic wasps.** Most of the small to large parasitic wasps that appear in homes in the winter have emerged from firewood stacked next to the wood stove. There are a great number of insects that parasitize other insects; most of the parasites are in the insect Order Hymenoptera (bees, wasps, ants, uncles)--and they are called "parasitic wasps". They look nothing like the typical wasps, and the *do not sting people*. The adults of these insects attack an lay eggs in a great variety of hosts, the immature stages of the parasitic wasp are usually internal parasites of the immature stages (larvae) of the host. One the parasite completes development it pupates, and sometime later emerges from the dead host. The beetles that infest firewood are subject to attack by a number of parasitic wasps--small ones and big ones!



When firewood remains in a warm house for several days the parasites that have attacked some of the wood-boring beetles in the wood may begin to emerge. Parasitic wasps are usually oriented to light, and may fly to lights at night, or certainly the windows during the day.

**Control.** There is no need for an extensive control program for these insects. *They are beneficial.* When the weather is warm (spring)--you can encourage these insects to go outdoors. In the winter a fly-swatter or at most an aerosol is the best control method.

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**Fungus gnats.** These small blackish-brown flies are probably the most commonly reported insect pest in the winter months. They can occur in large numbers in homes, stores, shopping malls, school, and offices! They don't bite, they do not fly very well at all, and really don't do much of anything except get some folks worried.

The immature stages of fungus gnats (small white maggots with dark heads) live in moist and decaying organic matter. The most common place for this substrate is potted plants and trees. Often in the winter house plants (or office plants, store plants, etc.) get over-watered, the soil remains moist for long periods, and this condition is excellent for the build-up of fungus gnat populations. The larvae usually do not cause damage to the plants, and the adults do not feed and do not live very long--just long enough to cause some concern among homeowners!

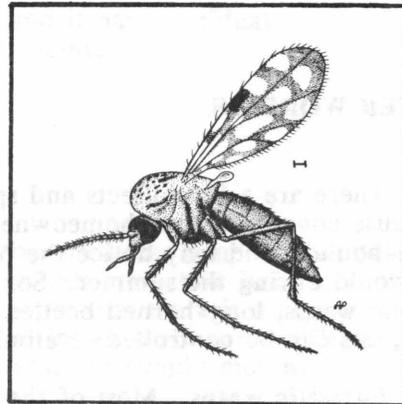
Control. Chemical control of these minor pests is usually not necessary. Simply allowing the soil in the plants to dry out for a few days or a week will kill the fungus gnat maggots. If a few cigarettes are allowed to soak in a small glass of water for a day, then the liquid poured over the soil there is usually enough nicotine in the water to kill the larvae in the soil.

**Long-horned beetles.** These insects also emerge from firewood that has been warming by the wood stove for a few days. Normally these small *bark beetles*, *pine sawyers*, or other *long-horned beetles* would emerge in the spring and seek out standing live or dead trees to infest. The warm temperatures can stimulate them to emerge early!

*The beetles that emerge from firewood in the house will not infest the structural wood in the house!* These insects require wood that has the moisture content of a live tree, or the moisture content of a tree that is lying on the forest floor. Many of these insects lay eggs in or under tree bark, and are associated with only certain trees. There is no need for homeowners to worry about these insect infesting household wood!

Control. An aerosol insecticide or a fly-swatter can take care of the few long-horned beetles that may emerge from firewood in the winter. There is *no need to spray insecticides on firewood!*

**Window spiders.** These jet-black spiders with the big eyes and the yellow or white markings on their back are often seen in the winter months--especially around windows.



(They are there all summer, but nobody notices!) They have the characteristic of jumping when they are disturbed.

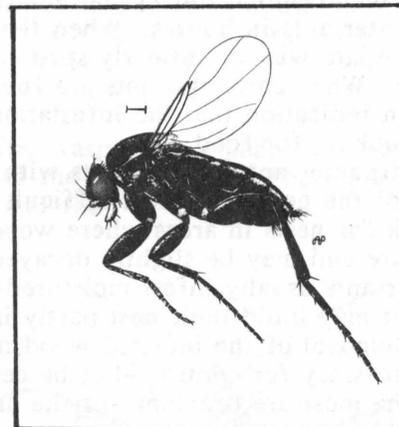
These spiders are very efficient predators of the fungus gnats, parasitic wasps, and even the small beetles that may show up at windows during the winter (and summer!). They do not build much of a web--but use their jumping and pouncing ability to get their prey. They do not bite humans, and really are not a serious pest--they just look a little dangerous!

Control. Usually control is not necessary for these insects, but an aerosol insecticide or a fly-swatter should do the job.

### HUMPBACK FLIES OR PHORID FLIES

Humpback flies or phorid flies (members of the fly Family Phoridae) are a group of small (1/8 inch long), blackish-brown flies that are commonly associated with decaying organic matter, especially clogged drains, and broken septic and sewer lines. They are sometimes reported as pests in restaurants, hospitals, and in houses in which there are problems with sewer lines. Their pest status is based on their presence in great numbers--*they don't bite or sting humans*. The larval stages of these flies live and feed in decaying organic matter.

Controlling humpback flies is best accomplished by locating the source of the infestation--the leak in the sewer, the clogged drain from the septic tank, the bathroom drain that is clogged with organic debris. Once the source of the infestation is located, it can be removed, and little insecticide need be applied.



### TERMITE CONTROL CHEMICALS

The EPA has not made final decisions on the use of chlordane for termite control in residential houses; and probably will not make that decision until later this year! In a few months the "termite swarming season" will be here--and homeowners will be given several choices from professional pest control operators on what chemical will be used around their house. Agents are likely to get requests for information on appropriate termite control chemicals. So, let's review what chemicals are available.

There are few if any chemicals available for the homeowner to buy and use. The only termiticide sold for homeowners is Orthochlor (Ortho) it contains dursban (don't know why it's called Orthochlor)! The chemicals used by professionals include:

**DURSBAN TC** - This is an organophosphate insecticide that has a residual life of approximately 15 years. It is the most common termite control chemical at this time.

**TORPEDO** - This is a pyrethroid insecticide that has a residual life of about 10 years. This material is odorless.  
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**TRIBUTE** - This termiticide is also a pyrethroid and it has a residual life of about 10 years. This chemical is odorless.

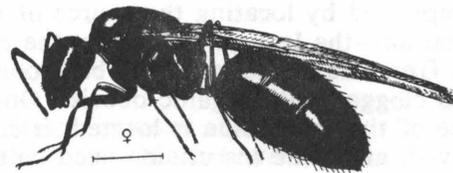
**DRAGNET FT** - This chemical is a pyrethroid insecticide and it has a residual life of about 10 years. It is odorless.

**PRYFON 6** - This termiticide is an organophosphate and it has a residual life of about 15 years. It is an odorless chemical.

## CARPENTER ANTS

Remember that during the months of January and February is the time to look out for carpenter ants in houses. When the large, black carpenter ants are active in houses during the late winter and early spring months it is an indication that there is a nest *in the house*. When carpenter ants are found in houses in late spring or early summer it is usually an indication that the infestation is outside, and the ants are simply moving indoors looking for food.

Carpenter ant control starts with the location of the nest--the most difficult thing to do! Look for nests in areas where wood is exposed to moisture and may be slightly decayed. Carpenter ants usually infest moistured-damaged wood, but may build their nest partly in sound wood. Removal of the infested wood may be all that is necessary for control--but be certain to correct the moisture problem--or the ants will be right back!



## INSECT NOTES

Each month I print an extra 50-75 copies of Insect Notes. I use them to answer requests for information from homeowners, and to attach to request to the Insect Identification Lab. forms. However, Agents that think that they would like to have a small supply of a particular issue of Insect Notes for a Master Gardner class, or for some other meeting--write and ask for them! If I have copies I would be glad to send you some.

Frequently I get request from new Agents for a complete set of Insect Notes. Well, that is very difficult for me to do, as I do not have copies of some of the issues for the first few years (we've been doing this for about 13 years!). However, for many of the major insect pests (household) I have repeated the information in some of the more recent issues. It is not really necessary to have a complete set.

