

Stink bug research continues

March 12, 2012

By Sarah L. Greenhalgh

The Winchester Star

BOYCE- Entomologist Tracy Leskey is hoping the 2012 stink bug season is not going to be like 2010.

According to the U.S. Apple Association, the brown marmorated stink bug caused an estimated \$37 million in agricultural losses in 2010 in the region. Local apple growers were bracing for an even worse year in 2011, but the stink bug apocalypse never really materialized.

Leskey, who addressed the Piedmont Blue Ridge Horticultural Society on Saturday at the State Arboretum of Virginia at Blandy Experimental Farm in Clarke County, said just because last year's invasion was mild by comparison, farmers and residents should still be vigilant about keeping the non-native species away from their farms and gardens.

"You shouldn't let your guard down," said Leskey, who works at the USDA's Appalachian Fruit Research Station in Kearneysville, W.Va. "Just because there were fewer last year does not mean they're not out there, and they are hungry and voracious feeders."

Although scientists don't why there weren't as many stink bugs last year, the up and down weather, with an October snowfall and a busy tropical storm season, might have been a factor.

According to Leskey, there's not much in the way of fruits and vegetables that Asian stink bugs don't like to eat, and they keep expanding their palate.

Soy beans, eggplant, corn, wheat, apples, peaches, raspberries and many nuts are among their favorite snacks.

Stink bugs damage plants by piercing them and sucking out juice.

Leskey said apple growers who have used cold storage for their crops many times have a rude awakening when they go to inspect their product.

"Fruit injury sometimes takes several weeks to show up," she said.

By then, the growers could have anywhere from 5 percent to 90 percent crop loss, she said.

Some of the damaged apples can safely be used for juice, but the grower has still taken a loss on the harvest, just not as big of a loss.

But apples aren't the only fruit stink bugs fancy - they also have a taste for grapes.

"Nobody likes stink bugs in their wine," Leskey said. "This is a real problem for the vineyards. They either need to apply an approved pyrethrum-based insecticide or hand sort every grape cluster."

Leskey and her team in Kearneysville have been working hard to determine what exactly attracts and kills stink bugs, which have more than one reproductive cycle per year.

They believe they have narrowed down a pheromone and a lightwave length the bugs seem attracted to, but it's not until later in the year that traps with these lures work best.

This year, researchers are hoping to implement traps that work on earlier reproductive cycles.

While crop destruction is a major problem, stink bugs also have become unwanted guests in homes and office buildings. They enter structures in the fall and exit the following spring or summer - a process called overwintering.

Stink bugs like to winter in homes but they also can be found hiding in dead trees.

"These protected dry areas in dead trees are a favorite place, so it is only natural that your home is one big dead tree to them," she said.

According to Leskey, stink bug traps on the market only work on the later reproductive cycles of the insect.

Considered a nuisance pest - because they do not carry disease or draw blood - scientists have traced the stink bug's arrival in the United States from Asia to some time between 1996 to 1999 in Allentown, Pa.

Expert hitchhikers, about 33 states have reported stink bugs since then. They have even crossed the Atlantic into Switzerland, so a not-so-distant European invasion might be on the horizon.

Leskey said one good thing they have learned over the years about stink bugs is they have a fondness for several invasive Asian plant species, and kudzu is one of them.

- Contact Sarah L. Greenhalgh at
sgreenhalgh@winchesterstar.com