

New Hampshire
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Granite State Home and Garden
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Are You Unknowingly Picking Up Hitchhiking Pests?

by

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Last winter, and I should know better, I picked up a dresser for one of the children's rooms in the "swap shop" at the local transfer station. The transfer stations used to be known as "the dump" and some of us still call it the dump. However, there is little dump about it, as today, recycling is the rule and what remains as trash for disposal goes into a tractor-trailer container for off-site management.

The swap shop is where people drop off stuff that they no longer want or need that other folks may be interested in using. Stuff is free and you can't beat the no-hassle return policy. Thus, the dresser was an apparent bargain. A significant lot of our children's toys have come from the swap shop and the toys go back to the shop when no longer wanted, that is, if we haven't worn them down to the disposal category.

Anyway, shortly after picking up the dresser, I began noticing carpenter ants walking around the house. One thing I've noticed about most pests, if you watch them long enough they typically lead you back to the "nest", and sure enough, in this case the dresser was the ants' home. I used a general use, over the counter ant control spray and also put out ant cups for a couple of weeks. Situation controlled, but this illustrates an example of how pest can hitchhike their way into our lives.

The lesson here is to thoroughly examine the items you may pick up and take home. I should have given the dresser an extra good once over before loading it into the car.

Probably one of the most dreaded hitchhikers today is the bed bug. It has made an explosive return to North America. This insect should not be associated with poor living conditions or filth. It is found across the socioeconomic spectrum and can hit the affluent as well as anyone else. It is the vampire of the bug world; it wants blood, it needs blood, it senses blood. Typically, bed bugs hunt at night and once fed can lay dormant for many months. If you travel, it is definitely something to be aware of. It is not particular in its choice of hotels and can hitch a ride home in your luggage, quickly becoming an infestation. While most hotels do an excellent job at keeping this pest out, it is valuable to be familiar with the pest.

There are a number of excellent web resources for identifying bed bugs and suggestions for control. One is www.nysipm.cornell.edu/whats_bugging_you/bed_bugs/default.asp.

Another website links to a credit card-sized fact sheet that you can carry in your wallet that helps in identifying bed bugs when travelling: www.nysipm.cornell.edu/publications/bed_bugs/files/bb_travelers_online.pdf.

The bed bug is not known to carry disease and not considered a health threat. However, it does bite and depending on your sensitivity, may create an irritable situation. The key to this critter is preventing it from making your home its home. If you do find bed bugs in your home after travelling, it is recommended that you contact a pest control professional to manage the concern. This is one tough bug to eradicate.

Back to the recycling of used furniture, some states have initiated regulations that prohibit certain exchange of furniture and household items, in particular mattresses, to curb the spread of bed bugs. Most folks would never consider the recycled mattress but I remember recycling sofas and chairs as a common college experience.

On Thanksgiving this year we had a big family gathering at my sister's house. About half way through the day my son pulled a Black-legged Tick ("Deer Tick") off his neck. I was a bit concerned given that it is known to carry Lyme Disease. I was also somewhat perplexed as to how it came to be attached to my son as a host as we had not been outside other than going from the house to car and car to house. After a little thought I decided to check my sister's dog. Sure enough we found another tick on the dog. The dog had been in and out of the house and, more than likely, carrying the ticks from fur to family. Here is yet another common hitchhiking pathway for a pest – the family pet. There are a number of prevention techniques and products available for controlling pests on our pets. Probably the best resource is to consult with the veterinarian as to what is safe, for both the pet and you.

Fleas can also hitchhike into our homes on family pets. Many folks use "total release foggers" sometimes called "bug bombs" or "TFR" to control fleas, cockroaches

and other flying insects. Sometimes the situation is such that folks get so frustrated with the presence of fleas that they use more pesticide than what is needed. In the pesticide world, the “more is better” way of thinking is often dangerous.

The label is the law and the bottom line is to read and use the material in strict accordance with the label. Unfortunately, results of overuse are disastrous sometimes resulting in fatality. In a study conducted by the Center for Disease Control in eight states between 2001 and 2006, 466 TRF-related illnesses or injuries were identified. Hardly a year passes without a serious news story of injury as a result of overuse of TFR.

The hitchhiking pest is worth considering, especially when traveling, or if you have pets. The ones noted above are common, however, every so often you hear about the very unusual surprise such as the black widow spider in the bunch of grapes or the exotic snake in an article of clothing. The initial key to keeping pests out of our homes is prevention. Knowing where to look and what to look for is extremely helpful. Once they are identified in our homes consider the pest and whether or not it may be a relative simple fix (a small colony of ants in a dresser) or something that requires professional assistance (many bed bugs). In any event, when using pesticides, always, and I mean always, read and use the material in strict accordance with the label.

For more information about pesticide safety, contact the NH Division of Pesticide Control, NH Dept. of Agriculture, Markets & Food, PO Box 2042, Concord, NH 03302-2042, (603) 271-3550 or pesticides@agr.state.nh.us , www.agriculture.nh.gov.