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News Release

They're Back—Even on Park Avenue

If you've ever seen the movie *Angela's Ashes*, based on the memoir by Irish-American writer Frank McCourt, you're already familiar with the misery bedbugs can cause. In one heart-rending scene, the bedbugs drive McCourt's destitute family out of their shabby flat into the chilly streets of Limerick, Ireland, in the 1930s. It's a powerful scene, but one that unfortunately reinforces the widespread stereotype that bedbugs prey only on poor people. Actually, that's not the case at all. Even the most affluent among us are not safe from becoming unwilling blood donors.

As Andrew Jacobs writes in the November 5, 2005, edition of the *New York Times*, they may be the "scourge of hobo encampments and hot-sheet motels," but they're also turning up on Park Avenue, managing to gain a toehold in some of the nation's swankiest 5-star hotels. Two Swiss women who spent a week in a posh Manhattan hotel even filed a lawsuit claiming their lousy stay was because bedbugs disturbed their sleep. Jacobs also reports that a co-op on Riverside drive spent \$200,000 to rid their buildings of the parasites.

Earlier this year, the *Birmingham News* reported bedbug outbreaks at a Birmingham hotel and at an area apartment complex. These sightings also are obliterating another common public misconception that bedbugs were all but eradicated through the use of DDT following World War II. So, what accounts for this perceived explosion in bedbug numbers recently? Experts have cited increased migration from developing countries, cheaper international travel fares and the recent banning of highly effective pesticides.

All of these factors have played a role, according to Dr. Xing Ping Hu, an Alabama Cooperative Extension System entomologist and Auburn University professor of entomology and plant pathology. But she stresses that the problem is a little more complicated than that. She believes the bedbugs likely were causing plenty of misery for years, possibly even decades, before media began taking note of them --- and then only when the parasites reached certain population levels. One thing is certain: Having bedbugs is not a pleasant experience in terms of the physical discomfort they cause and the effort required to eradicate them.

Like fleas, the blood-feeding parasites can enter a home or public place by the most insidious means imaginable, Hu says. And they can be found anywhere --- in tiny cracks, fabric, luggage, furniture and even inside books. Infestations occur in such intimate places as beds and bedrooms.

Hu, a native of China, had her own experience with bedbugs when they hitched a ride into her college dorm room on some unfinished furniture. In addition to being highly mobile and adaptive, bedbugs are also extremely prolific. One female can lay up to 500 eggs in one lifetime, Hu says. One blood meal can get her off and running, but even without that meal, the parasites can carry on for a long time, she says.

Bed bugs often are very challenging to control because they are nocturnal, seek cryptic sanctuaries, are very small and elusive and can detect and avoid many chemicals, including cleaning agents. In addition, they are easily transported on or in luggage, furniture, boxes and clothes, fitting through or hiding in very narrow cracks. Adults can live for months, and their young, called nymphs, can survive for more than 3 month without feeding.

Homeowners trying to control infestations on their own probably will not succeed and could even end up harming themselves and their property, Hu says. According to Hu, a far better strategy is to let pest control professionals do the job, though she stresses that this treatment should not be considered a one-time event. The pests can be effectively controlled by consistent applications of pyrethroid-based products.

While the increase of bedbug populations has gotten the attention of more entomologists throughout the United States, Hu says a lot more needs to be learned about them. She believes enhanced knowledge of the parasite is only one of many critical needs in a future in which transportation of people and goods across international boundaries is occurring at a pace only dreamed of a short time ago.

For more about this topic please contact Tony Glover, Regional Extension Agent-Home Horticulture, Home Gardens and Home Pest Management at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email gloveta@auburn.edu.

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