



Season 1 Episode 9 – Home Invaders

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Intro

From the Ground Up, a podcast of the Alabama Extension Home Grounds team, educating you about home landscapes, gardens and home pests.

Brian Brown

Dr. Meredith Schrader's, our guest today. She is the insect diagnostician for Auburn University and Extension, and she's here to talk about insect home invaders and how we can control those creepy crawlies that get into our house, especially the ones that come into the fall. So welcome, Dr. Schrader.

Meredith Shrader

Yes. Good morning. Thank you for having me.

Brian Brown

Well, it's great for you to be on. You know, a lot of people have things that crawl into their house and we get tons of calls being Extension agents. You know, we have to deal with this. So I thought this would be a great time to get this out in the fall and tell people how they take care of these things that are crawling in the house.

Brian Brown

Usually it's, you know, lady beetles or stink bugs, things like that. But before we get into that, tell me a little bit about your background. What got you into bugs as people refer to them, or entomology in general?

Meredith Shrader

Yes, I contribute my love of insects to my grandfather and grandmother, Poppa and Gammy. When I was little, they had, you know, the backyard garden and we'd always plant seeds together and tend the garden and I was the pest management for, for the, the vegetables. And we'd go around and squish bean beetles and stink bugs and just I learned, about gardening from them and I would get when I got a little older there was a little financial incentive that came into play, too.

Meredith Shrader

My my poppa would give me \$0.10 for every cabbage looper that I caught. And one day I made a buck 30 and I thought that was pretty good. But, you know, back in the early nineties, you could get, you know, two chocolate bars. Three chocolate bars, right. For a buck 30. So that's how I measured success back then.

Meredith Shrader

But just the love of the garden and insects and just that, that's how it all got started. And I really attribute it to the involvement of my, my grandparents and, and really stress that to everybody to be involved with their grandbabies. And because it turns into careers later down the road.

Brian Brown

Did you grow up in Colorado because you came from Colorado State, correct?

Meredith Shrader

I did. I, I did not actually grow up in Colorado. I'm a Virginian. I grew up on the East coast of Virginia, where Jamestown, Yorktown, Williamsburg area is. And you can keep the sand and the stingrays and the jellyfish. And I

did my college education is from Virginia Tech and the Blue Ridge Mountains. And that's really where I consider myself truly from because my I have roots in Galax/Hillsville area of Virginia.

Meredith Shrader

And then, you know, Virginia Tech. I have all three of my degrees there. So I bleed maroon and orange. And then I got a job out west in Colorado, and it was a wonderful experience and learned a lot out there. And but nobody knew what a tomato sandwich was. So then I had to come back come back to my Southern roots.

Meredith Shrader

And where people knew what tomato sandwiches were and okra. (Brian: Right.) So but it was a wonderful time in Colorado. Completely different environment, but definitely a wonderful time.

Brian Brown

So how did that compare with moving from Virginia to Colorado and then to Alabama? Because it's like you said, it's completely different, though, our environments. And I'm sure there's some overlap, but we just don't have a lot of the same insects or problems that we do here in especially the Deep South.

Meredith Shrader

Yes. Yes. It's a completely new environment. I went from, you know, the mountains of Virginia to the high desert in Colorado at 5000 feet, six inches of rain a year. Very arid, you know, not humid. Beautiful, though. Still had greenery still, but it's a different kind of green. It's cactus green and Russian thistle and kosha green. And but we we do interesting enough have some similarities, though, as far as agricultural pests go, because we've been able to modify the environment out there through modern irrigation techniques that we're able to grow a lot of the same crops, even though our soils out west are, are very alkaline and lacking in organic matter, we're able to kind of coax them to produce things.

Meredith Shrader

And an interesting fact, recently the Palisade area in Colorado, in Mesa County recently submitted a peach to the Guinness Book of World Records that weighed 2lbs. (Brian: Wow.) Five, five grams, something like that. So they now have the record for the largest peach ever grown. They took it from Georgia, and Georgia previously had the largest peach, but now Mesa County, where I was, has the record.

Meredith Shrader

But they still, you know, homeowners and green nursery people still deal with a lot of the same pests, but they tend to have scorpions crawling in their house more often than we do. We have a different scorpion, but it's, you know, in the south. But, you know, just dealing with the influx of different, different stinging insects out west and so unique, but also the same.

Brian Brown

So that's really interesting. So task at hand. Let's talk about home invaders a little bit. Why is the reason that we see so many things coming into our house, especially in the fall?

Meredith Shrader

Well, like you and I like a cozy environment, they too are seeking shelter for the winter and they don't want to be left out in the cold like we don't. And so they're trying to find an environment in which they can hunker down, go to sleep and, you know, get through the worst of it. And that's our homes that we have these, you know, modified environments.

Meredith Shrader

And we also have things on our house, not even necessarily inside the house that are attractive, but just your house itself is a large beacon. And insects like little nooks and crannies. And so siding on houses can be a place where insects can get in between the siding and, you know, the OSB boards. And people also like to start stacking wood near their homes, which is another big no no.

Meredith Shrader

But just we're making we have, you know, a large structure with nooks and crannies that is appealing to them. And then occasionally they find their way into our homes, which is even more beneficial for them, but not necessarily a good thing for us.

Brian Brown

So what's the most common thing that you're you see in your position is with home invaders?

Meredith Shrader

With home invaders in the fall in particular, you've mentioned one at the beginning, I believe, the Asian multicolored ladybug. It likes to aggregate in large quantities together for the winter and also the brown marmorated stink bug, which is a recent pest that has really come on to the scene. But it is it can be an invader of homes.

Meredith Shrader

Another one is the kudzu bug which is similar to the stink bug but smaller. And so those are kind of the big three that I get a lot of calls about. There are some other incidental ones like box elder bugs. They're red and black, very striking insects, but they can be a home invader. And another incidental one that that I have even encountered is the brown, smoky brown cockroaches trying to come in.

Meredith Shrader

And then the ones that fly, which is unique to Alabama, I have never been attacked by a flying cockroach until I got to Alabama. But it's the Asian field cockroach. They're a smaller cockroach, but they come in to your house looking for a nice place to overwinter. So flying cockroaches are not my favorite.

Brian Brown

I'm didn't even know that those were unique to Alabama. That's. That's really interesting. I thought everybody had flying cockroaches.

Meredith Shrader

No, you guys are special. We're special now. But those, those are the probably the the ones I get the most information or most concern about.

Brian Brown

I think probably my biggest volume of calls come from the Asian lady beetle coming in and everybody calls, "What do I do about these bugs? They're in my house" and I get lots of calls, especially in the fall- like you say,

they're seeking out shelter- so they stink. And that's really the big thing other than they're messy, but they really smell bad.

Brian Brown

And if you get in, you know, an infestation in your house, it's just it's so annoying. It's it's terrible. A couple questions about those one, what is it that makes them stink? And how are they different from regular ladybugs?

Meredith Shrader

Well, the Asian ladybugs, they do have a unique odor to them. It's just a chemical that they release as part of a group calling, calling their buddies in. And then also when you disturb them, they can release an odor as well. And that that's basically what when people are encountering that odor is, you know, the presence of them.

Meredith Shrader

And then when you're trying to get rid of them, they get aggravated and can also start releasing that as a defensive mechanism. They also are mean little buggers in the fact that they do bite, which is very not nice, especially if you're used to picking up our native, some of our native ladybugs like the Seven-spotted ladybug, they're just fine and dandy.

Meredith Shrader

But these guys, they, they smell, they invade in large numbers and they bite and they also stain your walls. So the best way to get rid of at least the Asian ladybug, if you're if you have them in your house, is not to try to even collect them with a tissue, because then you're going to have a smear on your wall possibly.

Meredith Shrader

And so the best thing to do for those guys is take the vacuum and go around and Hoover them up or use your shark wand and get up in the corners real high and collect them that way. That way, you're not risking being bitten. You're not going to stain your walls. And then, you know, you get them out of your house.

Brian Brown

I will add to that you might want to empty your vacuum cleaner if you vacuum a lot of them up because it does smell.

Meredith Shrader

Yes. Yes. That's the crucial part.

Brian Brown

Right.

Meredith Shrader

And you know, and don't just dump them outside. I know, because they might just come back in if they survive being sucked into that canister. Please, you know, for everybody, just dump them in a Glad bag, tie it up and make sure they can't escape because they, they will crawl out of your trash can if you just dump them in there. And then you'll just have to do it all over again. So dump the canister, tie the bag and throw them outside in the trash can.

Brian Brown

So how do you tell the difference between the Asian ladybug and then our regular ladybugs that are that are beneficial insects?

Meredith Shrader

That is a, that's a really good question. And unfortunately, there's only really one characteristic that really sets them apart from our natives. Unfortunately, there's they come in so many different colors and so many different spot patterns that I can't give you a specific color or number pattern like I can, say, with the Seven-spotted ladybug, I can tell you, you know, go out and look for a red ladybug with seven spots. But the Asian multicolored ladybug has a white W or a white M, depending on which way it's oriented.

Meredith Shrader

Right. But on its head it has a white W, and that's one of the main characteristics of the that ladybug to be able to tell it apart.

Brian Brown

So you really have to have a trained eye to really tell it and and good eyes too, let me say that.

Meredith Shrader

Yeah they, they can and they are typically the only one that will invade your house though. So if it's in your home or trying to get in your house around the window seals, our typical, native ladybugs aren't going to be doing that. So that's a key characteristic of if it's trying to get in your home, it's definitely an Asian multicolored ladybug.

Meredith Shrader

If it has that W then that's just another confirmation. So you can go ahead and get rid of that ladybug. We're not going to shame you for killing the ladybug. But that's one way to just tell.

Brian Brown

But so what about stink bugs? Stink bugs or the other stink bug you had mentioned earlier, the one that gets in our houses.

Meredith Shrader

Yes. There's two other stinky bugs. The brown marmorated stink bug is one. And then the kudzu bug both are, have been here just for a couple a handful of years. But the brown marmorated stink bugs also invade homes. And these are ones that I swear teleport into your home because you can find these in the most modern, recently built home that you know everything's sealed.

You got good weather stripping, good door sweeps, everything, caulking is good and then boom, stink bug.

Brian Brown

They just appear.

Meredith Shrader

Just appear. So that's my opinion is they have teleporting technology to get in your home. But they're they basically do the same thing as the Asian multicolored ladybug. They emit an odor when they're disturbed. They like to aggregate in groups. I've heard of people that didn't know they had them in their home, and they go to move a picture or move the drapes and then all of a sudden they have 20 stink bugs that they've just disturbed or revealed.

Meredith Shrader

And so that's not, not a fun thing to encounter. But again, these guys, they don't bite. So even if you grab them and handle them, they're not going to harm you. They just have that really bad odor and just vacuuming them, getting them out, is the best thing to do.

Brian Brown

So another one I get a lot of calls about is millipedes. And I've have them in my own home. They just get everywhere. You'll see one crawling across the floor. What do we do about those?

Meredith Shrader

Millipedes, yes - specifically, the garden millipede is one that that I get tons of calls about, pictures about. And they love Alabama. We have the high relative humidity. We get frequent rainfalls. And the reason a lot of people have them invading their homes is the fact that they like the organic matter that we use in our landscaping. And a lot of people don't realize that the mulch holds moisture for the plants, but also for the bugs and the millipedes and other little creatures.

Meredith Shrader

I try to tell people that there's not necessarily a spray or anything that will prevent them from getting in your home. It's more of an environmental step that you have to take to augmenting your environment to make it less habitable for them. And millipedes like to be in that organic matter. And so I try to stress to people that

having a barrier of gravel, at least a foot, foot wide from the base of the foundation of your home out to where your mulch line starts.

Meredith Shrader

And that way you kind of have a no man's land that doesn't have the moisture carrying capacity or the organic matter that they like to eat on right up next to your foundation. And so that way you can use that no man's land as kind of a treatment zone as well. Diatomaceous earth, it's a product that can be a little spendy and you do have to reapply.

Meredith Shrader

But some people call me, Brian, and they're at their wit's end with the millipedes, like they're getting hundreds in their house. And so a little bit of sweat equity reapplying that diatomaceous earth, which basically cuts into the cuticle of the millipede, and so they dehydrate and die. But building that barrier of gravel, getting that organic matter away from the edge of your house really inhibits their ability to, you know, crawl to even start invading your home. A little bit of sweat equity goes a long way.

Brian Brown

So would you put the diatomaceous earth right next to the house or would you put it in the gravel layer?

Meredith Shrader

In the gravel layer in that kind of no-man zone, so that they're actively having to crawl through it. And when you're applying it, it's crucial to wear a mask so that you're not inhaling the diatomaceous earth, because if it's cutting the insect cuticles, think what it will do to your lungs. So that's a kind of a critical step that some people don't necessarily take all the time.

Meredith Shrader

And then when you're applying it, I also get questions about, well, "how do I do that?" And if you have a sift, a sieve for like applying powdered sugar to donuts or to cakes or pastries, that's a good way to apply it. And I tell them it's like dusting a donut when you apply it: is you know, you don't want to, you know, have a layer that you can't see.

Meredith Shrader

You need to be able to see at least some of that on there. And unfortunately, because, you know, we get a lot of rain and it's in that area right underneath the gutters or right underneath house eaves, you do have to apply it more. But you should, and I tell people it's not a, it's not a silver bullet, but you should see some decrease in the amount.

Meredith Shrader

If you get half, you know, are you going to be happy with half? If you're getting 100 millipedes in a week, you know, is that going to be worth only getting 50 millipedes? And so it's all about economy of scale. But again, if some people are at their wits end and they're you know, this is something that'll help.

Brian Brown

When people call me and ask these questions, "How do I get rid of this in my house?" Most people want to go straight to the nuclear option of spraying something. Is that the best way they should go about this, or should they try other techniques like they do with the millipedes?

Meredith Shrader

It depends on the insect issue they're having. And when we start talking about sprays, I'm I'm all for sprays, I think sprays are another tool in your tool kit. I don't care if you're using a synthetic chemical or an organic chemical. It's an option. However, when because of the price tag that's involved with some of these products, the effective ones especially can be quite expensive.

Meredith Shrader

And so when you're looking at other options like modifying the environment a little bit or going out with that \$5 can of caulk, you know, and spending a little bit of sweat equity versus monetary means, then that can really that's your first line of defense is trying to seal your house the best you can, maintaining your weather stripping, your door sweeps.

Meredith Shrader

And then if you're if you still are having issues, then by all means, go ahead, get a product that has an effective ingredient against the insect or pest you're trying to get rid of. Another thing that I stress to people is reading the label because some products do not work as well on certain insects. So it's critical that they call you, or send a specimen to me, or reach out and just double check what they're dealing with to make sure that the product is effective.

Meredith Shrader

Because that's another thing. As you go out and you spend \$50 on something, you spray it and then find out a week or two later when you still have the issue that, oh well, it wasn't effective against what I had, so now I have to go and get something else. So now you're a \$100, a couple of hours of, you know, time into this issue and you're, you know, could have could have stopped it, cut it off a little sooner by getting an identification and then a proper product.

Brian Brown

When you're caulking around your house and sealing up cracks and, you know, making sure your floor sweep is good, you know, that's good for your house anyway. It keeps your house from leaking warm air or cool air, whatever the case may be. And it's just a good practice to do. So, make sure you're going around your house, sealing up those cracks, make sure you're checking where wires or pipes or anything goes in your house, too, because they're going to- if there's a hole or a crack somewhere, they're probably going to find it.

Meredith Shrader

Yes. Yes. Except stink bugs. They teleport in (laughs).

Brian Brown

That's right. I forgot about those (laughs).

Meredith Shrader

I was I'm just going to say that maintaining screens is also a good thing because I know I am looking forward to opening up my windows for a little bit just to get the fresh air and the circulation in. And, you know, I'm guilty of

using duct tape on the screens. That helps some. But, you know, again, maintaining screens and just general upkeep of your house.

Meredith Shrader

And, you know, you can have 100-year-old home and have it, you know, some of these modern things added to make it a little bit more insect averse when there, when it comes fall. But definitely a little bit of sweat equity is well worth it.

Brian Brown

Yeah. One of the entertaining things I guess you would say when I was a kid, I remember going to my grandpa's house and we would always sit on the front porch because that's where he liked to hang out. And so I would sit on the front porch with him. But one of the things that was entertaining to me was he had a bug zapper and that was the most entertaining thing to me.

Brian Brown

You know, we'd get some huge moth or something in there and it would just thrill me as a as a kid. So. yeah. Tell me about those. Are those effective? They were big in the eighties when I was a kid. So I don't I don't know if they still sell those or not.

Meredith Shrader

Oh yeah. Yeah I know it was like instant gratification or, like one of the big bugs like you were saying, it was like (makes sound effect) and then it would finally stop.

Brian Brown

Yeah. So are those effective or?

Meredith Shrader

Well, on a scale that we're trying to, you know, deal with? No, not really, no. But for having something out there, sort of I mean, it's, it's like you said, it's kind of entertaining. You feel like you're doing something to mitigate the insect population. But only certain insects are attracted to certain types of light. And so it's getting some insects, but not necessarily the ones that you'd want to kill.

Meredith Shrader

Like mosquitoes are more attracted to you sitting on the porch chatting with that CO2 that you're emitting than the glowing, you know, light that you would want them to go to. It's like go to the light. You're like, "No, no, I'm going to you. You smell pretty good sitting on the porch. That's where I'm going to go." So but again, from the eighties, I'm a child of the eighties as well.

Meredith Shrader

And so it's just something, it was a good marketing incentive. And you do get that instant gratification of "yeah, I got another one, ooh that was a big one". So I wouldn't, I wouldn't pay, you know, \$100 for it, but you know, you'll get some and it'll be fun.

Brian Brown

It's entertainment value.

Meredith Shrader

So yes, exactly. It's right now it's worth the price of some of these movies.

Brian Brown

Right. So since you opened the door to mosquitoes, what's an effective mosquito control? Because Alabama, we have tons of mosquitoes here. So what's the best way to control those?

Meredith Shrader

Definitely, you can cut down on the mosquito population specifically by emptying water containers or containers that hold moisture or by re-filling or emptying, or emptying and then re-filling, things that are critical for them. Bird baths are notorious for having mosquito larva because it's standing water and it's out in the open. And

that's just one place that people don't really think about "you know, the birds are using it, but mosquitoes are also using it."

Meredith Shrader

Things like children's play toys or toys that get left out there. And I am I'm really bad at going around and collecting the toys that my children use, and they should pick up after themselves, but they don't. That's just a fact of life.

Brian Brown

It happens.

Meredith Shrader

But emptying the red wagon that had two or three inches of water in it or, you know, making sure that I dump out my pots. You know, everybody has the terracotta pots that with the plastic saucers underneath, well, those can be breeding places for mosquitoes. And even I love ponds, but, you know, you need to make sure you have fish in there that are going to eat the mosquito larva.

Meredith Shrader

Or if it's small or a backyard little koi pond, you can get those mosquito dunks that have Bt, which is *Bacillus thuringiensis*, which is a bio control agent and little mosquito dunks, put those in, you know, standing water that's there for aesthetic reasons. But just something as simple as that can really cut down on the mosquito population directly, directly around you.

Brian Brown

Are the dunks safe for animals?

Meredith Shrader

Yes. Yes, most definitely. And if you are a little concerned about, you know, the ability of your dog to go and get it, you can weight them down and put them under the water, submerge them in some way, they're still going to release the product. It might happen a little quicker because more of the product is exposed to the water, but it will for peace of mind. You know, it might not last as long. You might have to replenish it more frequently, but it but it'll be out of sight and out of mind for your critters. But the Bt is a safe biological product.

Brian Brown

Yeah and Bt is organic so.

Meredith Shrader

Yes, people like that word.

Brian Brown

That's right.

Meredith Shrader

That's right. Another insect that I get frequently into the office is the ant species, and we have tons of them in Alabama: the little black ants, odorous house ants. Specifically the ones that do get into your homes, typically, I don't advise people use sprays like Raid. Those products or our "see 'em and kill 'em" products and they work great for roaches and wasps.

Meredith Shrader

But ants, really what you want to do is target the colony. And that the best way to do that is with ant baits. And typically most ants, not all but most ants, like the sugary baits year round. And so if you get a liquid bait product that has sugar, it'll usually say somewhere on the packaging if it's a sugar-based bait or a protein-based bait or carbohydrate-based bait, the sugar ones are typically better.

Meredith Shrader

Those you can leave on the counter. Usually animals aren't going to be interested in lapping, lapping it up. But you do have to do a little bit of due diligence in finding the ant trail. So if you if I just set it on the counter and I haven't seen any ants around on that particular counter, they're not going to typically find it.

Meredith Shrader

So putting the ant bait in the way of the ants so that they find it, they take some back, they recruit their buddies, they get it, they take it back- typically the colony is gone within two weeks. That's typically the best way to get rid of the ants inside the home. Sometimes your, you know, people get a little concerned when they start seeing carpenter ants.

Meredith Shrader

And those are the big, black mama-jamas that are like an inch long. If you're seeing those in your home that might be a completely separate issue with home invaders. So that's when I'd call on somebody to do a pest inspection to just make sure that, you know, your roof and, and home is in good condition because those typically aren't home invaders unless they're setting up shop or have a colony.

Meredith Shrader

So another thing...

Brian Brown

You have issues if you start seeing the really large ants.

Meredith Shrader

Yes. If you start seeing the really big, one-inch-long carpenter ants, then then that's more of an issue than just these, you know, little black ants, or little red ants or Argentine ants that are that are coming in looking, looking for food. And you know you can have colonies of odorous house ants in your home and your baseboards. Typically, that's where they like to be is in the baseboards, in that nice gap.

Meredith Shrader

But yes, if you if you see the carpenter ants, get them identified and then, you know, do a check of, of your attic of some of the wood to make sure that you don't have a bigger issue. And people don't do that necessarily every year. Every year you should be looking in your crawl space if you have one.

Meredith Shrader

You should be in your attic looking for things that are helter-skelter or odd, smelling the environment, seeing if it smells funky or damp or moldy and, you know, just being a good steward to your investment. So, but yes, the big black ants are an issue if you have a lot of them. One thing I do want to stress about ants is that you can get rid of fire ants in your environment.

Meredith Shrader

And I recommend that you that you do treat for those on your property. They're just not a pleasant thing to encounter. And, you know, toddlers especially, they don't care where they sit down in your yard, and I guarantee you they will sit down right on the fire ants nest if you have one. So I do encourage people using products to get rid of fire ants from your yard.

Meredith Shrader

I do not recommend that people wage an all-out war on all ant species and your yard. People want to get rid of everything and it just becomes, well how many hours a week are you going to invest in trying to get rid of these ants or pavement ants that are, you know, harmless? Or how much money do you want to spend on trying to get rid of the ants that'll be back in two weeks?

Meredith Shrader

I do, I do recommend getting rid of the fire ants. But trying to maintain a pristine ant free environment just isn't, isn't appropriate. But kill them when they're in your home and kill the fire ants for sure.

Brian Brown

I would say that's probably one of the ones that was completely different than Colorado.

Meredith Shrader

Yeah. Yes. Yes. We had some other ants, but yes, no fire ants in Colorado. We had some other really impressive ants like harvester ants: big, large mandibles, really pretty, that take, cut down huge chunks of grass. But yes, definitely, definitely not as mean-spirited as the fire ants, though. They're just mean.

Brian Brown

They are. So, Dr. Shrader, thank you so much for joining us today. I've learned a whole lot about how to keep our home invaders out. So hopefully, as you're listening to this, you will put some of these into play this fall because you're probably going to get some of these coming into your house. So we appreciate you being here and giving us all this information.

Meredith Shrader

Yes, thank you for having me. And just remember, everybody reach out to your local Extension agent to get pests properly identified. We can, I can look at specimens as well. I'm free. Just send me a photo. I'll get back to you in a timely manner. Usually within 24 hours. So just keep us in mind.

Brian Brown

All right. Thanks.

Meredith Shrader

Thank you, Brian.

Brian Brown

From the Ground Up is a production and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.