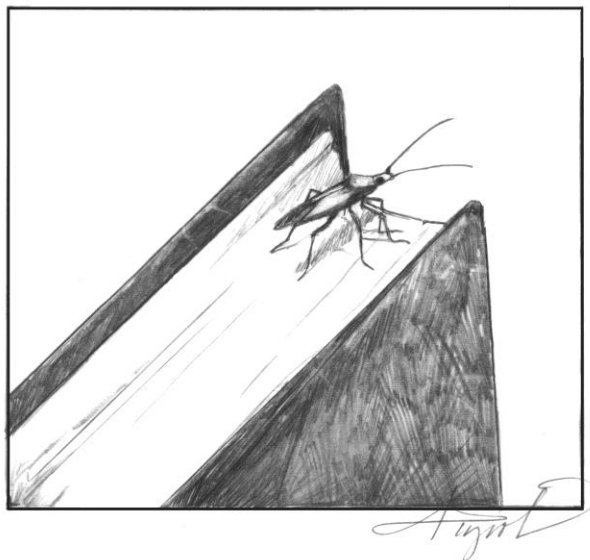


# The Outside Story



## Boxelder and its Namesake Bugs

By: Joe Rankin

Comedian Rodney Dangerfield's shtick was the phrase, "I don't get no respect," always followed by one of his great self-deprecatory one-liners.

If Rodney Dangerfield were a tree, he might be *Acer negundo* – the boxelder, which also gets no respect. When boxelder isn't being ignored, it's being disparaged, dismissed, or damned with faint praise.

Boxelder, also known as ash-leaved maple, can be a fairly big tree: it can grow 50 to 75 feet tall and more than two feet in diameter, though it often has multiple trunks.

"It has the greatest range of any North American maple," said Kevin Smith, senior plant physiologist at the US Forest Service's Northern Research

Station in Durham, New Hampshire. The tree is found across much of the US and into Canada, and continues to expand its range. It likes streams and wet, rich ground, but will thrive even in poor soil – a virtue or a vice, depending on your outlook.

It's considered worthless as a timber tree "because its wood is light, soft, close grained, and low in strength," according to a US Forest Service species summary, which also points out that the "soft, spongy wood generally makes poor firewood." That would make a one-star Amazon review.

The same characteristics generally make boxelder less than desirable as an ornamental. Michael Dirr, author of *Dirr's Hardy Trees and Shrubs*, wrote that there might be an argument for using boxelder for decoration in places where nothing else will grow. But, Dirr added, it's not really a pretty tree: the "wood is subject to breakage, insects and diseases . . . temperance is the rule when considering this species" as a landscape tree.

And the tree is commonly infested with boxelder bugs (*Boisea trivittata*). Clusters of these striking but smelly half-inch-long black insects with red edging often invade homes en masse in the fall; looking for a place to overwinter, they awaken and emerge to share your living space when the heat comes on.

Despite its perceived flaws, boxelder has some redeeming values. It is a fast growing tree that is quick to colonize bare ground. It serves as food for wildlife, from birds to squirrels to deer. And it's a maple, so if you have a sizable boxelder, you can tap it to make syrup.

One segment of the population particularly likes boxelder: wood turners. The creamy wood is often tinged red, and the heavily furrowed bark of mature trees makes for a striking, natural-edge

bowl. Smith said the eye-catching streaks in the wood are part of the tree's response to injury. In sugar maples and red maples, the streaks are green, but in boxelder, they are a reddish-carmine color. The color comes from phenolic compounds produced by dying cells in the tree as part of its effort to wall off an infection, said Smith. Boxelder's efforts to compartmentalize injuries, he adds, tend to be unsuccessful more often than those of other maples.

And now to the real question: how do I deal with those blinkin' bugs? Well, it's better to keep them out than to try to control them once they get in. So arm yourself with a caulk gun and try to plug any crevices or holes in your siding. Some experts recommend spraying insecticide on the outside walls of your house, but you'll have to respray a few times.

Don't spray insecticides between the studs to kill the bugs: you don't want your insulation soaked with poison, and you most certainly don't want a pile of dead, rotting boxelder bugs in your wall. A vacuum is the best way to remove them when they (inevitably) wake up in the middle of winter and start crawling around your bedroom. Don't forget to seal up the bag after vacuuming to make sure they don't just crawl out.

One way to reduce the boxelder bugs' numbers is to cut down female boxelder trees nearby. The bugs feed on the boxelder seeds (and those of other maples and ashes), so they tend to remain near a host tree.

Drastic, I know – especially if you have a large boxelder that still looks good. If you decide to go that route, maybe contact your local woodturning club and trade the wood for a bowl or two.

*Joe Rankin writes on forestry and nature and turns wood, antler, and other materials at his workshop in Maine. The illustration for this column was drawn by Adelaide Tyrol. The Outside Story is assigned and edited by Northern Woodlands magazine: [northernwoodlands.org](http://northernwoodlands.org), and sponsored by the Wellborn Ecology Fund of New Hampshire Charitable Foundation: [wellborn@nhcf.org](mailto:wellborn@nhcf.org).*

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