

Meet the spotted lanternfly, the bug health officials are begging you to kill on sight

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Whether you choose to kill insects or not, there is one bug across the northeastern United States health officials want you to take care of immediately: the spotted lanternfly.

Though it may seem like a colorful moth worthy of an Instagram post, it's actually an [invasive species](#) that can wreak havoc on trees, plants and other landscapes, resulting in millions of dollars in damages.

The spotted lanternfly originates from China, and George Hamilton, department chair of entomology at Rutgers University, believes they landed in the U.S. via a crate coming from the Asian country. The invasive insects—which actually don't fly but rather are leafhoppers—were first spotted in Pennsylvania less than 10 years ago. Now, they can be seen throughout the northeast and mid-Atlantic, from the five boroughs in New York City to parts of Indiana.

They may have spread so easily because they are hard to notice. From hiding on cars and packages, they've become such a problem that New Jersey and nearby areas have issued quarantine orders, asking people to inspect their vehicles before traveling. In Pennsylvania, there are 34 counties currently under quarantine.

"They're very good hitchhikers," Hamilton told USA TODAY. "Most people don't even know they've got them until the adult form comes out."

The good news about the insects is that they can't harm humans or pets. However, they cause massive damage to plants and are known to feed on over 70 different types of trees and plants.

But the damage doesn't end there. As Amy Korman, a horticulture

educator for Penn State Extension, says, "What goes in must come out."

The spotted lanternflies secrete a sticky material known as honeydew, which is very high in sugar. It is a substrate for mold, and when it gets on plants, it prevents them from photosynthesizing which then leads to the plants dying. The mold these lanternflies leave can end up in backyards and decks and can attract numerous other bugs.

"It seems like it's such a fragile insect. And yet it's been so successful in taking over our landscapes," Korman said. "It's sort of like the Pandora's box of problems."

They've destroyed vineyards throughout Pennsylvania, according to the Philadelphia Inquirer. A January 2020 study done by the Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences found that if the species isn't contained, it could result in at least a \$324 million hit to the state's economy and the loss of around 2,800 jobs. A [worst-case scenario](#) estimates a \$554 million economic loss and almost 5,000 jobs lost.

The study also found current spotted lanternfly-related damage is estimated to be \$50.1 million per year with a loss of 484 jobs.

"This insect has the potential to be such a significant economic burden," Korman said. "We're still working on ways to manage this insect. We haven't cracked the nut and how to really manage populations of this insect very well."

The states impacted by the spotted lanternfly have a variety of ways to handle the population, but they all have the same goal.

"First thing you should do is kill it," Hamilton said.

If you don't feel up to killing a spotted lanternfly, Hamilton added the

next best thing to do is to take a picture of it and report it to your state's department of agriculture. The state of Ohio has a form residents can fill out.

Scrapping and destroying the eggs also helps control the population.

"The only good ones are dead ones," Korman said.

There are numerous ways to kill them, including the use of pesticides or simply crushing them. Extreme heat or cold also does the trick as well.

Korman added that she's heard of many different ways people have handled the insects, which has ranged from detergents, alcohol and even kerosene.

"Sometimes you have to laugh. I's like you really came up with that concoction and you thought it was gonna work?" she said. "'I'm always scratching my head over with the next great home remedy will be."

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