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# SUNNYSIDE THYMES

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## Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

SMG Education Committee

The **Harlequin Bug** (*Murgantia histrionica*) is an important insect pest of Cole crops (aka crucifers or brassicas) such as cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, turnip, kale, collards, etc. in the southern United States. In heavy infestations, other vegetable crops such as asparagus, bean, cantaloupe, onion, pea, potato, squash and tomato may be affected. Some fruits such as grape, peach, pear and raspberry also may be attacked by harlequin bugs. Plants are damaged from the piercing-sucking feeding of both nymphs and adults. Leaves brown and look tattered. Plants may wilt, become deformed, or die under severe infestations.

The life cycle of the harlequin bug consists of three stages: egg, nymph, and adults. A generation requires 50-80 days. Eggs are generally located in rows on the underside of leaves and resemble tiny white barrels encircled by black bands with a black crescent on top. Eggs hatch in 4-29 days depending on the temperature. There are five instars that feed and grow for four to nine weeks before they are mature enough to mate. Coloration gets showier with each molt. Adults exhibit a flat shield-shaped body up to 3/8" long. At rest, the front pair of wings overlap resulting in the insect's back appearing to be marked with an X. Generally, harlequin bugs are brightly colored, typically black and red or black and yellow. Color patterns vary per the season. Harlequins are stink bugs and therefore adults will produce a 'stinky' odor when disturbed.

Adults overwinter in sheltered locations including crop debris. Therefore, it is a good idea to remove crop debris from the garden at season's end to eliminate these overwintering sites. Eliminate ground covers or weedy areas, especially those containing mustards, in early spring before population numbers build. In small numbers, eggs, nymphs and adults can be scouted and squashed. Floating row covers can be used to exclude harlequins. Insecticidal soaps and neem oil can be used to target nymphs. Adult harlequin bugs love the annual flower cleome which thus can be used as a trap crop. Spray infested cleome with an appropriate insecticide or dispose of infected plants in black trash bags.



Eggs under leaf



Adult on kale leaf